

THE SADDLE BOYS ON MEXICAN TRAILS



CAPTAIN JAMES CARSON

CHS-(20)E



"WE SEEM TO BE HOLDING OUR OWN, FRANK!" HE CALLED OUT.
Saddle Boys on Mexican Trails.

The Saddle Boys on Mexican Trails

Or

In the Hands of the Enemy

BY

CAPTAIN JAMES CARSON

AUTHOR OF "THE SADDLE BOYS OF THE ROCKIES," "THE SADDLE
BOYS IN THE GRAND CANYON," ETC.

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BOOKS FOR BOYS
BY CAPTAIN JAMES CARSON

THE SADDLE BOYS SERIES

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THE SADDLE BOYS OF THE ROCKIES
Or, Lost on Thunder Mountain

**THE SADDLE BOYS IN THE GRAND
CANYON**
Or, The Hermit of the Cave

THE SADDLE BOYS ON THE PLAINS
Or, After a Treasure of Gold

THE SADDLE BOYS AT CIRCLE RANCH
Or, In at the Grand Round-Up

THE SADDLE BOYS ON MEXICAN TRAILS
Or, In the Hands of the Enemy

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THE SADDLE BOYS ON MEXICAN TRAILS

CHAPTER I

THE LOCOED BRONCO

"DID you see that, Frank?"

"Something your pony did, I reckon, because I heard Navajo cavorting at a pretty lively rate while my back was turned."

"Why, he tried to throw me! He's been acting queer for the last three or four miles."

"Too bad you had to take him for a mount, Bob, when you found your own Kentucky horse Domino had pulled up lame at the last minute."

"But Bart Heminway, the Circle Ranch foreman, recommended Navajo as a clever bronco, and said I'd own up I had never thrown leg over a smarter beast."

"Well, it strikes me Bart ought to know; he's been on the cattle trail nearly thirty years, I reckon, Bob."

"There, he's at his ugly tricks again, Frank! If that's a specimen of his nature you don't find me picking Navajo again when I need a mount. Whoa! you cantankerous little fury, what ails

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you? I'll saw your tongue good and hard with that curb-bit, see if I don't!"

The boy on the nervous and unruly cow pony was Bob Archer. He was a native of Kentucky, and had come out to the wonderful Arizona country partly for his health, and at the same time see something of what living on a great cattle ranch meant.

Just then his ruddy cheeks and sparkling eyes told that he was enjoying the best of health. His father was interested in mining ventures with Colonel Leonidas Haywood, the prosperous stockman and father of the second lad—Frank.

Circle Ranch was a busy place as a rule, and the chums were seen upon their horses so much that somehow they had become known as the "Saddle Boys" all through that section of country.

And since the arrival of Bob Archer they had passed through some pretty lively times. As narrated in the first volume of this series, "The Saddle Boys in the Rockies," they had investigated and learned the truth in connection with a remarkable rumbling that seemed to come from the interior of a mountain situated not far from the cattle ranch. This terrifying sound had mystified the cowboys for some time, and was believed by the superstitious Indians to be the voice of the Great Manitou.

After that, circumstances took the two boys across country to the wonderful region where the Colorado River runs for a long distance through the most astounding cut in the earth known to world travelers. Here they met with a series of exciting adventures, all of which will be found in the pages of "The Saddle Boys in the Grand Canyon."

Colonel Haywood had, in conjunction with Mr. Archer, a controlling interest in the Cherry Blossom Mine, which was threatened by a combine headed by a Mr. Grant, whose cattle-raising enterprise, the X—bar—X, was situated not a great distance away from the Circle Ranch. As there was a sudden call for the colonel's presence to save the day, and a broken leg prevented him from responding, Frank and his chum started across to the mining country on their horses. What dashing things they accomplished after arriving on the ground, and how they brought order out of chaos, you will find described in detail in the third volume, entitled: "The Saddle Boys on the Plains."

A little while after their return home from the mine, it happened that Circle Ranch fell heir to serious trouble on account of the depredations of certain cattle rustlers, headed by a notorious Mexican named Pedro Mendoza. With their accustomed spirit, the chums entered into the

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game of checkmating the running off of the choicest cattle, and naturally this brought them into a number of exciting episodes, which you will find set down in the book that precedes this volume, under the title of "The Saddle Boys at Circle Ranch."

Which explanation allows us to once more accompany the two chums in their gallop over the level stretch of country on that bracing day, some weeks after the round-up had been successfully accomplished.

Frank, who had been slightly in the lead astride his favorite horse, Buckskin, now pulled up slightly, the better to watch the strange antics of the animal Bob was riding.

"Why, now that I think of it," he remarked, thoughtfully, "Ted Conway rode that horse up to a month ago. He never told me why he made the change to the piebald bronc', only that he had found a mount he fancied better. Perhaps this thing has been growing on Navajo. I'd like to take a turn on him, and run him till he nearly drops.

"Leave that to me," urged the Kentucky boy, "if he keeps on showing this ugly trait. Look at him give that queer jump, and try to bite at my leg! I've met with some ugly ponies since I came here, but honestly, Frank, I never saw one do that before. He acts as if he was crazy!"

Frank started, and bending a little lower in the saddle, scrutinized the intractable animal at closer range.

"Your saying that one word has given me an idea, Bob," he presently observed, as he raised his eyes and met the inquiring glance of his chum.

"What word was that—crazy?" asked Bob. "Well, horses can get off their base as well as men; can't they, sometimes?"

"That's right, and I've seen a pony act this way once or twice before," Frank replied. "The boys said he had been locoed; that is, he had eaten the loco weed, and it nearly always acts on a horse so as to send him into the wildest spasms you ever saw. Sometimes they get over it, but as a rule they have to be shot. I've known punchers who'd rather have their mount struck by a prairie rattler lying in the mouth of a marmot hole, than know he'd be eating loco weed."

"Well, that's all news to me, Frank," returned the Kentucky boy, seriously; "but do you know of any of this dangerous weed growing around Circle Ranch? Seems to me your father would have had every scrap cleaned out long ago."

"We have, make up your mind to that, Bob. Dad hates the stuff worse than he ever did rustlers like Mendoza. He says you can locate them, and run them down, but the poison of the

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loco weed works in the dark. If a pony eats it you never know just when or how it's going to spring a surprise on you.

"Well, that's pleasant news you're telling me, Frank," remarked Bob, with a mirthless laugh and shrug of his shoulders; "suppose, now, Navajo gets a streak, and has to be shot? That means your Buckskin would have to carry double all the way home, or to the Arrowhead Ranch up the creek, where I could get the loan of another mount."

"Keep a tight rein on him, Bob!" suddenly called Frank, as the animal under suspicion once more started his strange antics, bucking, whirling around, and seeking in every way possible to throw his rider, at the same time endeavoring to snap at Bob's left leg, his strong white teeth coming together with vicious force.

Bob was a clever rider, as most Kentucky boys are. Since coming to the cattle country he had picked up many new tricks connected with the game, and unless some unexpected accident happened, it would have to be a remarkably smart pony to get Bob off his back. He could cling like a leech to the saddle, and urge the bucking bronco on with shouts, and slaps of his hat, in true cowboy fashion.

There was something so different about the actions of Navajo that anyone who called him-

self a judge of horses could easily see the animal was not behaving in such a strange manner through the impulse of an ugly temper.

Frank soon realized that the situation was getting serious. He had had experience with all sorts of bad ponies, and did not fear the worst of them; but Bob was not such an old hand, and might be caught napping. His greatest fear was that Navajo might, in rearing, fall completely over, and pin Bob beneath him.

The Kentucky boy had his hands full in trying to manage his wild animal; but he seemed to know instinctively that Frank was hovering close by, with a desperate purpose in mind, if it came to the worst.

"Don't shoot him, Frank!" Bob called out, in a voice of entreaty. "Let me manage him, please! I can give him all he wants, and then some! The crazy little beast is bound to get tired after a while. He's foaming at the mouth now, and wet with sweat. He's sure to knuckle down in the end, barring accidents. Don't cut in under me, and take my game away, Frank! You know I can do for him in the end!"

This sort of pleading had its effect on the ranch boy. He realized deep in his heart that by rights it would be a wise thing for him to put a bullet into a vital place, so as to dispose of the mad pony before he could do any damage; but at the

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same time he understood how Bob's Kentucky pride would feel hurt if he interfered in the least.

So he hovered close by, manipulating his own horse skillfully in order to keep away from the danger. If Frank had entertained any doubts before with regard to what ailed Navajo, they no longer troubled him. He knew the loco sign only too well; and he also guessed that sooner or later it meant the death of the victim.

Bob was carrying himself well. Here and there they swirled in the midst of a cloud of alkali dust. The pony continued to act as though impelled by madness, but Bob was ever alert.

The young Kentuckian seemed determined to conquer the pony, after which they could decide upon the final disposition of the animal; but as the minutes crept by without any apparent slackening of the raging of the horse, Frank began to think he would be foolish to wait much longer before taking a hand.

He had just about decided to do so, despite the reproaches which he knew would be showered on him by his indignant chum, when something happened that changed the entire programme.

In prancing around, the mad bronco must have suddenly set its forefoot in a prairie dog's hole, for without warning he went headlong, and Bob was thrown, alighting ten feet away in a heap.

CHAPTER II

AN UNSEEN HAND

"WHEE! are you hurt any, Bob?" shouted Frank Haywood, when he saw his chum begin to struggle to his knees, and with an effort gain his feet.

Bob seemed rather surprised as well as chagrined over his unexpected header. He could be seen to feel his arms and legs, and rub his shoulder, as though that pained him a little. Then he cried:

"This is my lucky day, Frank! He caught me napping, and by rights I deserved a rough deal; but I seem to be all right. Look at Navajo, Frank; I honestly believe he must have broken his leg in that prairie dog's burrow!"

The cow pony was rolling over, and making desperate efforts to get upon his feet again, all the while gnashing his teeth and acting as though still influenced by the strange poison weed.

"Yes, that's just what he's done," declared Frank, as he started to raise his rifle, which part

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of the time had been slung alongside his saddle. "It hurries the end a little, that's all."

The quick report of the gun was followed by the complete collapse of the pony. Frank was a splendid shot, even when in the saddle, and seldom missed his aim.

"Too bad!" said Bob, advancing toward the spot where the stricken bronco was kicking his last; "that seemed to be a good pony, and I was beginning to believe he'd give even Domino a run for the money, up to the time he started acting queer. So that's the way loco weed serves 'em; is it? Well, I think it's a shame that any stockman would allow a spear of the stuff to grow on his range."

Frank seemed to be pondering over something.

"Bob, this is a mighty strange business!" he observed.

"Well, I don't hanker after another of the same kind, that's a fact," the Kentuckian went on to say, as he rubbed his lame shoulder. "Next time I mightn't be so lucky. That was a terrific shoot I made over his head. If I'd come down on anything but soft prairie soil, it would have broken my collarbone, or an arm."

"That's as true as you live," Frank continued; "but, Bob, I wasn't referring to your luck when I spoke. I meant that the fact of Navajo getting any loco weed bothered me a heap."

"But I don't understand what you mean by that, Frank; wouldn't Navajo be just as apt to eat the stuff as any other pony?"

"Yes, but where would he get the chance?" demanded Frank.

"Why, I remember now that Bart said the beast was likely to act some fresh, because he hadn't been out of the corral for nearly a week!" Bob exclaimed, as he turned a puzzled face toward his chum.

"That's it," the other continued, seriously; "and don't you see, Bob, someone must have fed it to him this very day, because it gets in its work before many hours have gone by!"

"Whew! that would mean someone at the ranch!" ejaculated the other. "And after it was known that I meant to ride Navajo in place of my own horse! But, Frank, how did it come they didn't give Buckskin a dose at the same time, if they wanted to injure both of us?"

"Every pony isn't going to eat loco weed, in the first place," replied the stockman's son, "and Buckskin may have cut his wisdom teeth. Then again, perhaps the fellow only had enough to dose a single pony. Of course we may never really know how that is; but I'm as sure as anything the trick was done at Circle Ranch. Say, father will be furious when he hears of it."

"I'd certainly be sorry to stand in the boots

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of the coward who did it if the colonel finds him out," added Bob, as he looked a little sadly toward the now motionless body of the stricken bronco. A true lover of horses, he felt the utmost indignation toward the miscreant who could coolly doom a fine animal to certain death.

Frank had quieted Buckskin's prancings by now.

"Get your saddle, and other fixings, Bob," he told the other, with the business-like air of one who was used to meeting emergencies; "no use staying around here any longer. I think we'd better head for the Arrowhead Ranch, and borrow a mount. But don't say a single word to anybody about what we think. It's enough to explain that we had to shoot your pony after he'd broken a leg."

"But, Frank, who could be guilty of doing such a thing? I didn't know I had an enemy at Circle Ranch, and I'm sorry to believe such a thing now."

"Mebbe you haven't," Frank told him. "It might be the fellow stole up during the night, and fed the pony the stuff. Though in that case why he'd pick out Navajo from all the rest bothers me. But leave it to me, Bob, and I'll do all I can to find out the truth."

"If it came from outside you must be thinking of our old rival and enemy, Peg Grant,"

Bob observed, as he removed the saddle from the dead pony. "He's never gotten over how we broke up his father's game at Cherrystone Mine. I wouldn't put it past that sneak to think up some trick like giving a pony loco weed, and setting him crazy."

"Perhaps we may strike some sort of clue later on," Frank told him. "I intend to find an answer, and that's why I want you to keep as mum as a clam about it till I give the word. Here, I'll take that saddle in front of me, and you climb up behind. It won't be the first time Buckskin's carried double."

When all these arrangements had been completed, and Bob was perched on the back of the stout little cow pony of which Frank was so proud, the latter dug his heels into the sides of his mount, which immediately started off with a jump, as though scorning to show any sign of being overloaded.

Mention of Peg Grant's name must have aroused vivid recollections of other days in Bob's mind, for he and his chum had had some lively times with their unscrupulous rival, who bore them such a violent hatred that he would stoop to almost any evil in order to even the score between them.

In the days gone by he had been ably backed up by a cowboy of mixed blood named Spanish

Joe, who with his nephew had been a thorn in the flesh of the two saddle boys. That worthy was no longer at the X—bar—X Ranch; but Frank knew his place had been taken by an even worse scoundrel, also a Mexican, named Carlos, who was suspected of having at one time been hand in glove with the rustlers.

Aware of this, Frank could readily believe that this snake in the grass, urged on by the money of the vindictive Peg, had crept into the corral at some time and tempted Navajo with the loco weed secreted in a bunch of sweet hay.

As the country around them was well known to the ranch boy, he having spent most of his brief life in that region, there was no difficulty in making a bee-line for the friendly stockman's place, known as Arrowhead Ranch. On arriving there they received a warm welcome, for most of the ranchers in that section respected Colonel Haywood highly, and looked on him as somewhat of a leader, since he always took a prominent part in ridding the country of pests that preyed on their cattle, whether in the shape of wolves or rustlers.

Frank simply stated that as Bob's pony had broken a leg, they had been compelled to shoot it, and would be grateful for the loan of a bronco for the ride home. He promised to send the pony back by one of the Circle Ranch range

riders, though the genial owner of the Arrowhead outfit told him not to be in any hurry, as they were long on mounts, and short on cattle.

Being urged to remain over to dinner, Frank and Bob agreed, and made merry with the boys of the Arrowhead Ranch, most of whom they knew well. So long as they stood a fair chance of getting back home before dark, they were in no hurry about starting.

When the sun had dropped nearly half-way down the western sky, however, Frank decided that the time had arrived when they had better be going. They had a boisterous send-off from the bronco-busters of the neighboring ranch, several of whom even galloped for a mile with them, exchanging loud calls, winding up by wishing them all manner of good luck, and discharging their guns in a parting salvo.

"It's been quite a lively day, after all—eh, Bob?" Frank remarked, over his shoulder, he being at the time a little in advance of his chum.

"Why, it certainly has, for a fact," Bob admitted; "and I'm not going to soon forget my first experience with a locoed pony."

"How about that shoulder?" queried Frank. "I saw the stockman's mother bathing it with some sort of ointment. She's a good old soul."

"Yes, and her home-made liniment seems to have done the business, too, for I hardly feel any

pain. I came down pretty hard, and there's a black and blue mark to show for it; but as I said before, my lucky star was shining when poor old Navajo stepped in that burrow."

"I hope you'll never be in the saddle again when your pony goes mad from eating loco poison weed," Frank told him.

"We're going to cross the trail of a bunch of riders over there, Frank," ventured the other a little later; "and it strikes me they don't look much like cow punchers, either."

"They're not—at least none of our brand," Frank responded, after taking a look. "I can see Mexican toggery, and the chances are they are a bunch of cow punchers from south of the border, *vaqueros* they call them down there, bent on getting a job with some stockman across the line. The pay is better up here, you know, and they run no chances of revolutions breaking out any old time."

"We'll soon see," observed Bob; "because we're bound to cross trails soon."

The other party proved to consist of three Mexicans, all showing by their dress that they were accustomed to the cattle business. The one who seemed to be their natural leader was a wiry, black-faced customer, whose looks Frank did not like, but who showed considerable ability with

regard to asking questions in connection with the ranches in that section, and where there was a likelihood of additional punchers being needed.

When the parties separated, the Mexicans waving the boys a boisterous good-bye, Frank's first remark as he turned to his mate was suggestive of suspicion.

"I told them we had more boys at Circle Ranch just now than the work called for," he said, "because, while dad wouldn't mind picking up a couple of good punchers, he's dead set against all greasers nowadays. We haven't one on the place, you remember, Bob. And between you and me and the lamp-post, I want to say right here I didn't like the looks of that man. I don't believe he is straight."

CHAPTER III

THE NIGHT ALARM

THE boys had figured correctly the time it would take for them to cover the ground. While the borrowed pony might not be the equal in stamina of either Buckskin or Domino, there was no fault to be found with his willingness.

They chatted as they galloped along, and the range of subjects embraced nearly every adventure that had been their portion since the coming of the Kentucky lad to the southwestern country.

As the sun sank low they came in sight of the white-washed buildings of Circle Ranch. Here and there bunches of cattle could be seen, some being chased by hard-riding punchers. Several times these greeted the boys with yells, and wild swinging of broad-brimmed hats, for the average cowboy is nothing if not vociferous on all occasions.

When Frank and Bob drew near the porch of the main building, Colonel Haywood, who had been sitting with feet perched high on the railing, while he calmly smoked his pipe and contemplated the activities that were marked upon the spreading landscape, arose and came slowly forward.

"Listen to what he's going to say, Bob, and let me do the talking," observed Frank, in a low tone.

The stockman stood there for a dozen seconds, and then remarked:

"That beats anything I ever struck!"

"What, Dad?" asked Frank, trying to keep a straight face.

"Bob went off riding Navajo," the owner of the ranch continued, in a puzzled manner; "and he comes back with a different hoss between his knees, unless you boys are playing some trick on me, and have changed the looks of the pony vastly. But he doesn't act like Navajo, and what's more, it isn't he!"

"Why, you see, we borrowed this animal over at Arrowhead Ranch," Frank explained to his father.

"Other pony go lame on you, like Domino did? It must be catching with your mounts, my boy!" and he laid a caressing hand on Bob's shoulder; for the young Kentuckian had by this time become almost as dear to Colonel Haywood as his own son.

"We had to shoot Navajo, Dad," said Frank, after glancing around to make sure no other person was within earshot.

"That's too bad!" exclaimed the stockman. "What was the matter; did he manage to break

a leg in a gopher hole? I've lost plenty of good ponies that way in my time."

"That's what he did, Dad," Frank continued; "but only after he'd gone clean crazy. I was just going to wind him up when he took the plunge, and sent poor Bob flying over his head. Luckily Bob wasn't hurt much; and I gave Navajo the lead that ended him. But, Dad, it was loco weed set him off like that!"

"But see here, son, you know we haven't a bit of that growing within twenty miles of here. And more than that, Navajo hasn't been out on the range for some days now. Are you sure it was loco weed, Frank?"

Frank made a gesture to indicate caution.

"We'd better not breathe a word of what we suspect to a living soul, Dad," the latter replied, "because that stuff was given to the pony *here!* I want to try and find out if any puncher on the Circle Ranch list is taking pay from someone who is down on Bob and myself, and would like to hear that one of us had been brought in with his arm or leg broken."

Colonel Haywood stared at his son, but quickly the light of understanding appeared in his keen eyes.

"Between us, Frank," he said, through his set teeth, "I wouldn't put it past that miserable young Peg Grant to plot such a crooked game,

though just how it was managed gets me. We'll have to draw closer lines around here, and keep an eye on even those we believe to be with us. Money is a great temptation for a man to sell out his best friend, especially if he is the creature of drink."

"But you won't say anything, even to Bart; will you, Dad?" pleaded Frank.

"Not if you say not to," replied the stockman, who had the greatest admiration for the manly qualities shown by Frank. The boy bade fair to become capable of managing the many enterprises in which Colonel Haywood was commercially interested.

"I'm going to browse around, and pick up the trail, if one was left," Frank told his father; "and it'll be easier work for me if the boys don't know just why I had to shoot Navajo. I'd like to catch anybody trying such a slick game again, that's all. The boys would soon see that he had a coat of tar and feathers when he was chased off the range!"

Colonel Haywood was frowning as though even more displeased than he chose to admit; but presently gave free rein to his feelings.

"I was in hopes that we'd hear no more from the Grants, father and son, after that last setback they had at the mine," he observed; "but then I reckon it's always a case of a scotched snake

with them. As long as they draw breath they will continue to be mean, and full of low schemes. I was even thinking of holding out the olive branch to Grant; but after this I'll have to change my mind. You can't mix oil and water; after you've done shaking the bottle they will separate as before."

"The Arrowhead people were as kind as could be, Dad," Frank continued; "and you sure have made good friends over that way. We told them the pony had to be killed after breaking a leg, because he never could be used again, and was better out of suffering. And, by the way, while we were riding home afterwards we crossed the trail of three Mexican punchers who've just come over, and want to take a job with some cattle man in the U. S. They said it was getting too warm across the line, and that another revolution was likely to break out any day now."

Colonel Haywood frowned, and shook his head.

"I hope you didn't tell them I could use a couple more boys, Frank?" he said.

"I gave them to understand that it was no use applying at Circle Ranch; because I knew you never had a greaser on your payroll if you could get a white man," replied his son. "And from the way they headed when we said good-bye, I reckon they mean to make a first try at the X—

bar—X. I heard that three of their boys had left on the first, and gone North; said they wouldn't work for the syndicate at any price. They may strike a job there, because Mr. Grant rather likes Mexican help. They'll do lots of things other men would shy at, I'm told."

The stockman stroked his white mustache reflectively, and then said:

"I've a good reason for disliking the breed, son, and some time perhaps I'll tell you about it. I expect to do it before long, now that you are getting to an age that I can depend on you fully. But I don't like the idea of that X—bar—X crowd getting gay again, and trying to injure us. I'll kind of warn Bart, and get him to put the boys on their guard. When the bars are up it's going to be rough on the fellow caught trying to hurt anyone connected with Circle Ranch. I'm a slow man to get angry, but once I'm aroused I strike hard!"

Frank knew this better than most people. He had seen his father under great provocation more than once and had admired the masterly way in which as a rule the stockman managed to hold his temper in check. But once he did give way, he could be a terror to those whom he considered evil-doers.

Accordingly it was presently noised about among the punchers, as they came in by detach-

ments, that Navajo had met the fate that befalls many a good pony on those open plains which are infested with prairie dog villages. They nearly all knew from personal experience what that meant; and Bob was congratulated on having come out of the accident so well.

"I had a tumble like that once," a squatty puncher named Scotty declared; "and it laid me up for a good three months with broken bones. I always thought myself lucky it didn't break my neck in the bargain."

"That's the good of having a rubber neck," he was told by another rough rider.

Frank and Bob allowed them to go on talking, and let fall no hint that there was something more serious about Bob's adventure than had been told.

In fact, Frank was using his eyes to advantage all the time he seemed to be exchanging chaff with the other fellows. He had hopes of discovering some sign on a face that would betray disappointment. If the one who had planned this trick had offered a certain prize should it prove successful, and one of the saddle boys be laid up with severe injuries as a result of the maddened bronco's tearing around, the fact that after all he had failed to earn his reward would be likely to make the offender look resentful.

Despite all his efforts Frank could not decide that he was any nearer to learning the truth when

the supper bell sounded. If one of the punchers was guilty he knew how to hide his feelings. Perhaps he suspected Frank was on the watch, and that caused him to remain on guard.

"Never mind," Frank told his chum, as they washed up, and then made for the long apartment where Ah Sin, the Chinese cook, served the employes of the ranch, "it's a long lane that has no turning. There's nothing doing so far, but give me more time and I may strike oil."

"I hope you will," Bob replied, "but I'm not going to worry any about it. After all, I know what loco means now, which was something I didn't know before to-day."

Frank and Bob spent part of the evening in the bunk-house, and the stockman's son had a good opportunity to further study the various types of humanity represented. But he did not seem satisfied when, with his chum, he later left for the main house, where the pair had their room

"I'm more than ever convinced," he told Bob, "that someone must have slipped in here last night, and tried to give the loco weed to both our ponies. They were too smart to eat any of it, and the greedy Navajo managed to get hold of it. If that's how it happened, you can see that it was only by mere chance you picked out the very animal that was going to go crazy when heated up by the long ride."

Later on they sought their bunks, tired after the exhausting gallop of the day.

Bob had determined not to let the day's happenings prey on his mind, and consequently when he finally lay down, it was to go to sleep almost immediately.

He dreamed, however, and must have been seized with something like a nightmare, for he seemed to be pursued by a wild bull with tremendously long and sharp horns, and to be unable to move his feet fast enough to escape.

Just as he expected to feel himself tossed into the air, to be trampled underfoot when striking ground again, he was conscious of a confused racket somewhere, as if a great concourse of people had gathered to witness the triumph of the bull.

Then rough hands were laid on him, and he realized that it was his chum who shouted in his ear:

"Wake up, Bob, wake up! There's something gone wrong! Don't you hear the alarm bell ringing? And that's dad whooping it up out there! Get some clothes on, and grab up your gun! Whatever you do, hurry—hurry for all you're worth!"

Bob, wide awake on the instant, hastened to do as he was told, though his hands trembled and his heart beat furiously.

CHAPTER IV

WHEN DAWN BROKE

"WHAT's he shouting, Frank?" asked Bob, in a voice that trembled with excitement, as with his chum he dashed outside.

The alarm bell was jangling furiously, and the booming voice of the stockman sounded above the clamor, though Bob could not make out what Colonel Haywood was saying.

Here and there punchers were dashing about, all excited, and ready for anything, from an attack on the part of cattle rustlers, to a raid of hostile bandits from across the border, bent on general pillage.

"Sounds like robbers to me," replied Frank. "But then, dad never keeps any big sum in the house. Come on, Bob, and we'll soon know."

Although Frank could speak so calmly, the truth was he himself felt greatly excited. He was picturing all sorts of terrible things as he ran forward to where his father was standing at the base of the little tower, where the big bell hung, with a gathering group of eager-eyed cow punchers surrounding him.

The stockman no longer jerked the rope that kept the alarm bell banging. He appeared to realize that he had by now accomplished his purpose, which was to arouse every soul on the place. It looked as though he had done this, for even Ah Sin could be seen skirmishing along the outskirts of the crowd, trying to conceal the long-handled meat knife which he had snatched up as he came through the cook house from his bunk beyond.

"What's the matter, Kunnel?" asked Bart Heminway, the foreman, who was brandishing a huge gun.

"There's been a robbery committed since we went to bed," said the stockman, trying to speak calmly.

"A—what?" gasped the astounded foreman.

"Some person or persons entered the ranch house, and opened my desk, taking what little money I kept there, besides something else that I valued ten times as much as the cash. I was awakened by feeling the night breeze strike in on me, and looking around found a window open that I could swear I fastened before turning in. Then I looked further and found I had been robbed!"

A jargon of exclamations and outcries followed.

"Kunnel, p'raps I might throw some light on

these goings-on!" a tall old puncher called out, and Frank saw that it was Hank Coombs, a veteran of the trail, from whom he had learned almost everything he knew about woodcraft.

"Then let's hear it, Hank," the stockman told him, "because it's all the blankest kind of a mystery to me. What do you know?"

"'Bout an hour back, more or less, I heard hosses speedin' away," Hank replied. "I even sot up in my bunk to listen, till the poundin' died away. Then I jest told myself it must be the saddle boys here a-goin' off on another hunt; er else a bunch o' punchers startin' out after long horns to ship at the station. But sense you tells us thar has been a robbery done, I reckon it was the thieves makin' tracks I heard."

"Nobody has gone away from this ranch to-night to my knowledge, or at my orders," declared Colonel Haywood; "so it seems that you must have heard the robbers. Get ponies, boys, and we'll follow 'em. Perhaps we can find the trail, and get an idea which way they went, though chances are ten to one they headed south."

"Dad, don't forget what we told you about those three greasers!" called out Frank, as with his chum he hurried back to their room to get more clothes, and arm themselves.

There was certainly excitement around the

headquarters of Circle Ranch for ten minutes or so after that, with everyone rushing this way and that, men shouting to one another, and horses neighing shrilly. Then a party of half a dozen of the most active dashed up to where Colonel Haywood, Frank and Bob were already sitting in their saddles.

Old Hank Coombs had a lantern, and was carefully scrutinizing the ground in the quarter where he felt sure the sound of horses' hoofs in a retreating gallop had come to his hearing.

He suddenly let out a whoop that brought the others crowding over to where he stood.

"Don't crowd in and spile the trail, I tell ye!" he roared, as the punchers came tumbling that way. "I wants the boys to git a glimpse o' these ere hoss tracks, and mebbe Frank'll tell us he's seen 'em afore!"

The old trailer had trained the prairie boy himself in all that goes to make a successful woodsman; and he felt pretty confident that Frank would use his eyes to advantage. When he saw the boy throw himself to the ground the old hunter chuckled with satisfaction, and was heard to mutter:

"Didn't I know it? Ye ain't a-goin' to fool Frank 's long's he's got his sight."

One good look the saddle boy took at the imprints of hoof-marks left by several running

horses; then he turned toward his father and said:

"Just three of them here, Dad; and didn't we tell you that was the size of the greaser bunch that had crossed the border? They were a pack of thieves, and had come up here to rob the first ranch they struck. Yes, and look at that hoof-mark with the split, just as if it belonged to a cow! Didn't we both notice that the pony the head man of that outfit rode had one hoof broken like that—eh, Bob?"

"That settles it, then, son; we're after the greasers like hot cakes. Hank, jump on your horse, and lead the way. Bart, you wait for the rest of the boys, and tell them to scatter, and ride like the wind toward the border. By day-break some of us may overhaul them. I'd give a heap to get back what they took, and I reckon I know who sent 'em here to get it!"

Frank heard these last words with more than a little wonder. Even as he and Bob put their horses to a gallop, and swept along in the wake of the clever old scout who, bending over in his saddle, was evidently following the trail by the aid of the lantern he carried, Frank was cudgeling his brains to grasp what they might mean.

He remembered that only a few hours before his father had hinted there was a good reason why he should distrust and dislike all Mexicans,

and that he meant to tell Frank just why before long.

"There's your mother waving her hand to you from the porch, Frank!" Bob told him, and this caused both Frank and the colonel to swing around in their saddles and signal in return to the figure in white that had watched all this wild preparation of departure.

It was wonderful to note how old Hank was able to keep going along at such a swift pace, and at the same time follow the trail, with only the feeble light of a flickering lantern to assist him. But he was known to be a marvel at this sort of thing, and the stockman always looked to him when there was any trailing that needed to be done.

Far into the night they galloped. Frank knew from the position of the stars that dawn was only a matter of some two hours, and even Bob had learned, when watching stock on the range of a black night, how to tell time from the setting of the various planets, and other signs.

Again and again did they strive to pierce the gloom beyond, in the hope of making some discovery. After a time Colonel Haywood managed to push alongside the two boys. His manner indicated that he wished to ask further questions, undoubtedly with regard to the three Mexicans whom the saddle boys had met on the plain.

"How were they mounted?" he called out, as he came up.

"I wanted to tell you, Dad," returned the boy; "they had two spare horses along with them; but we didn't think that so queer, because punchers often own other ponies than the ones they ride."

"Were they of any account, do you think?" demanded the anxious stockman, as they all rode onward, with the bent figure of the old hunter in the van.

"Pretty husky looking stock for greasers to own," replied Frank. "Looked as if they might be the pick of some Mexican ranch. They were a hard lot of men, as I told you before."

"Yes, yes, I know you did," the stockman returned; "and it all goes to show this was no accident, but that he sent them up here for that purpose. Well, they got what they came after, and it looks as though they would give us the slip. It can't be helped, but who would ever thought it could come about after all these years!"

All this added to the eagerness of Frank to know what it meant. Who was intended by "he," and what had "he" wanted so badly as to organize a secret expedition, with the intention of securing it by stealth?

An hour had now passed, and they showed no signs of halting. It was plain that the three fugi-

tives knew just where they were going, for they had turned so as to give a wide berth to the desert that lay between Circle Ranch and the Mexican border.

"It's all been laid out in advance, to a hair, and with their extra ponies they're apt to leave us in the lurch, I'm afraid, boys," the stockman said, the next time he closed the gap between the chums and his former station just back of old Hank. "But we'll keep going as long as we can, and trust to luck to overhaul them. Nobody can tell what may happen. I wouldn't bother about the small sum of money they got, if only they hadn't taken that other thing!"

"Isn't that daylight beginning to show over there on the left?" asked Bob, joyfully; for with his bruised shoulder troubling him again, he did not particularly fancy this wild dash through the darkness.

"Yes, you're right—that's what it is, Bob," Frank agreed, and if there was a ring of pleasure in his voice it could hardly be wondered at, for he was by now greatly worked up over the possible escape of the thieves.

By slow degrees the faint light broadened, until quite a strip showed along the eastern horizon. From dead gray this in turn began to grow pearly, and then came a faint glow that told of the approaching sun.

Of course it would be dawn long before they

could expect the glowing disc of the sun to peep above the rim of the earth. They could now see around them, and tell just where they were. Frank and his chum had ridden far on the preceding day, as had all the punchers; but this was an old story with them, and none dreamed of making it an excuse for dropping out of the chase.

They looked to the right, and to the left, but as a rule their attention was centred on the view directly ahead. Old Hank, seeming to be made of iron, so that he never tired, continued to swing there in his saddle, and keep watch of the trail. He no longer needed the light of his lantern, which he had swung at his saddle bow, ready for some future use. And he could sit upright now, for when three horses plunge through the alkali dust that lies amidst the clusters of buffalo grass on the level plain they leave a broad track that even a greenhorn could follow.

As the little band thus galloped at top speed a sudden cry from Hank Coombs, far in the lead, came drifting back to the others.

“What does he say?” asked Bob.

“He has sighted something ahead, and tells us to get more speed out of our ponies!” Frank told him, and somehow the prospect of overtaking the three thieves gave Bob Archer satisfaction.

CHAPTER V

OVER THE BORDER

"THERE, I saw him then!" burst out Bob, a minute later.

"It was a man on a pony, as sure as anything!" added Frank, showing that he too had observed the object ahead.

"Yes, and he was a Mexican, too, Frank!"

"Looked like it, from his style of dress," the prairie boy continued. "These men from south of the border love bright colors. You hardly ever run across a Mexican that is not wearing a gay sash, and such things."

"Silver buttons on his slit trousers and his velvet jacket," Bob remarked, for he had taken pains to observe these things since coming to the Southwest, "and as for his hat, it's his chief delight."

"I've seen one that was worth a good hundred dollars," Frank told him; "but we must be gaining on that fellow. There, see him making through that open place, and pounding his tired pony like all get-out."

"Oh! we'll soon overtake him; but what do you reckon it means, there being only one instead of three?"

Frank was not slow to reply. He seemed able to figure out these things almost instinctively, it seemed.

"You remember what we found out, Bob, and that they had two led horses along?" he told his chum, as they urged their mounts to press onward at a faster clip than ever.

"Oh! I see what you mean now!" cried the other. "Those other fellows just changed their ponies, and on the fresh mounts have left their pal behind. I should think that was a mean trick. And chances are he's boiling mad over being deserted."

The chase was now very exciting, for the pursuers, having sighted their intended prey, were in full cry. To Bob it was like many a hunt he had seen in his native State of Kentucky, when a pack of hounds had been put on the track of a sly fox accused of visiting the hen-roosts of the community. Having closed upon the runner until they came in full sight of him, the dogs would burst out into a deafening clamor, and increase their pace.

The two saddle boys kept up with the others without much effort. Indeed, such was the superiority of the horse Frank rode that had he

wished he might easily have outstripped all the rest. He was not foolish enough to attempt this, however, when there seemed to be no actual necessity for it.

The fugitive had about exhausted all the means at his command calculated to increase the speed of his tired mount. He continued to turn in the saddle, and look back frequently, and his stinging quirt fell with a monotonous movement on the heaving flank of his almost exhausted steed.

Closer and closer the pursuers pushed. One or two of the cowboys were handling their guns in a significant way, and Colonel Haywood had to admonish them as to their duty.

"Not a shot must be fired unless I give the word!" he roared, and the reckless bunch knew he meant what he said.

"Hold up, there, or we'll riddle you!" he next shouted at the fleeing man.

The Mexican took one last look around, and he seemed to realize that he could not escape from his pursuers.

Accordingly he suddenly drew in his cayuse, and elevated both hands as high as he could get them. That was the recognized western way of signifying that he considered himself "all in," and relied upon the sense of justice and fair play of his enemies not to shoot a helpless man in cold blood.

In another minute they were around him.

"Take his gun away, Frank!" ordered the colonel, and as this was just what the boy had contemplated doing, he instantly snatched the weapon from its leather holster.

Another of the punchers had laid hold of the bridle, so that further flight on the part of the Mexican was impossible.

The prisoner lowered his hands, as though understanding that it was no longer necessary to keep them raised. Colonel Haywood was not a man to mince words. He knew the value of time, and accordingly went directly at the task of forcing the prisoner to give them all the information that was in his power.

"There were two others with you," he told the dark-faced man who sat listlessly on his worn-out pony, and at the same time pointing down toward the ground, by which he gave the other to understand they had been following the trail of himself and his two companions.

The greaser looked at the stockman as though sizing him up. If so, he must have realized that it would be folly to antagonize so determined a man.

"*Si Señor!*" he answered with alacrity.

"Where are the other two thieves?" continued Colonel Haywood, pointedly.

The man showed no resentment at being classed

with lawless characters, for his reply was equally prompt.

"They gone on; have two ponies, and change mounts!"

"How long ago was this?" asked the stockman.

"Two hours, surely," replied the other, so eagerly that it was plain to be seen he cherished high hopes of saving his miserable life by giving the enemy all the information in his power.

"Then they must be miles ahead of us, and gaining all the while, because our horses are beginning to feel the strain," declared the owner of Circle Ranch. "They are heading for the border, are they not?"

"*Si Señor*. They hope to reach Mexican soil soon, and be among friends," came the disappointing answer, and the sigh that accompanied the words told how much the speaker regretted that he, too, had not owned an extra horse to carry him to safety.

"You broke into the ranch building, and robbed my desk; you won't deny that fact, will you?" persisted the stockman.

The Mexican eyed him again. He was possibly trying to figure out what course it might pay him to take, and to decide whether to protest his ignorance of what was meant, or frankly own up, and throw himself on the mercy of his captor.

"Search him, Scotty!" ordered the stockman, angrily; "we have no time to waste with such a coyote. Our only hope of overtaking the others is quick work."

This sort of talk evidently frightened the prisoner, for he instantly made up his mind to tell everything.

"It is true, *señor*, we did break into your casa, and steal what money we found in the desk," he burst out.

"Here's the proof, Kunnell!" declared the puncher, whose nimble fingers had been prying into the various pockets of the prisoner's garments; and he held up several American greenbacks as he spoke, doubled into a wad, and which would hardly be found on a Mexican rider, fresh from over the border, in search of work on a ranch.

"There was something else taken along with the small amount of ready cash I happened to keep in that desk—own up to that, now!" demanded Colonel Haywood, bending closer to the captive, threateningly.

"*Si, Señor*, something else we found, and which Francisco, our leader, himself took charge of, leaving the money to be divided between Juan and myself."

"A small sealed package about a foot long; wasn't it?" continued the stockman, as though

determined to make the prisoner confess everything.

The man immediately nodded his head in the affirmative. He was watching Scotty out of the corner of his eye, and seemed uneasy at noticing the cowpuncher nervously fingering the butt of his gun. That was the real reason he answered all the questions of the ranch owner so quickly; he believed that these determined American cattlemen would as soon snuff his wretched life out, feeling they had just cause for so doing, as partake of a meal when hungry.

"You came across the line with that very purpose in view; didn't you?" continued Colonel Haywood. "Your leader, he knew a certain wealthy *haciendado* by the name of Don Gonzales down there in Sonora—tell me?"

"It is true, *señor*; we stopped at his casa for two days, and he treated us to the finest of his wines. But I am not the one he did business with. Francisco, he alone was in the confidence of Don Gonzales. We did as we were told, and the pay was enough to make it worth while to take the risk. But I myself was a fool not to spend a part of my pay for a spare mount."

Colonel Haywood seemed to be satisfied with what he had extracted from the prisoner.

"Boston, you are to take charge of this rogue," he told one of the punchers in the group, whereat

the latter's face took on a disappointed look, for he would much rather have been allowed to remain on the fighting line. "Remember I expect you to get him safely to the ranch, and will take no excuse for his escape. The rest follow me. We're going to keep on the jump, and if those slippery scoundrels get away it won't be because we laid down. Hank, take up the trail again, and don't let the grass grow under your horse's feet, either! So long, Boston!"

They were immediately off at full speed. Boston had drawn his gun, and was sitting in the saddle looking sorrowfully after his mates; but not the slightest sign of remonstrance had escaped his lips. He knew that when the stockman gave an order like that he meant it.

The trail was so plain that Hank did not seem to have the slightest difficulty in following it. Evidently the fugitives depended upon the fleetness of their mounts to carry them across the border before their enemies could come up.

From time to time Frank and Bob, crowding close at the heels of the guide's pony, would sing out, and ask what the chances were. They did not receive very favorable replies at any time.

"Gainin' a leetle on us, I'm afraid, boys!" old Hank told them; and while he believed a little later that the pursuers might be holding their own, not once could he truthfully say that

they were shortening the distance between the fleeing Mexicans and themselves.

The pace was telling on their ponies. It required constant prodding and the frequent use of quirts to induce the animals to keep on. Just how many miles they had covered since starting even Frank could hardly guess; but he feared the end was in sight.

While disappointed himself, because he hated to think of such a bold dash not being crowned with success, Frank was doubly grieved on his father's account. He had heard what passed between the stockman and the Mexican they had captured, and his curiosity concerning the mysterious packet had reached fever heat. Surely it must contain something that his father valued very highly.

Then there was that name of the Mexican *haciendado*, Don Gonzales; Frank could dimly remember having heard it mentioned in the past, though for the life of him he could not say what connection the wealthy Sonora cattle-raiser and proud Mexican *hidalgo* had with his own family.

When it came noon Colonel Haywood threw up his hand, and called out:

"We are now on the border line, boys, and with such a good start the rascals have given us the slip; so all we can do is to return home again!"

CHAPTER VI

THE SEALED PACKET

THE following day Frank and Bob, lounging near the corral, after the latter had attended to the lame foot of his pet horse, started talking once more of the unpleasant subject of the fiasco.

"If you asked my opinion, Bob, I'd say Domino would be able to take some exercise by to-morrow, or the next day. The hurt is about

"It is, but let me tell you, I'll always be sorry I wasn't on his back yesterday, Frank. I honestly believe the two of us might have given the thieves a run for their money, and perhaps caught up with them just across the border. But outside of your Buckskin, there wasn't a single pony worth shucks in our bunch."

"Oh! well, never mind," his chum told him, trying to forget how greatly disappointed he himself had felt when forced to return home without having accomplished the end they had in view. "I think the same as you do about it; but we must accept the fortunes of war. We can't expect to get there every time we start, you know."

"Your father was upset over it; wasn't he, Frank?"

"I never saw him seem more cast down, and ever since I've been wondering what it could be he had in that sealed packet. I don't seem able to guess worth a cent."

"That rich Mexican don wanted it about as much as your father, too," added Bob, slowly. "Just think of him paying those three hard riders to come up here and steal it away! How would they know that it was kept in that desk? Looks to me as if he might have sent another spy up here before now, and in that way learned where it was hidden."

Frank shook his head as though greatly puzzled.

"Father promised to tell us something about it to-day," he remarked, "but it's getting late in the afternoon now, without his saying a word. He just keeps sticking in that office of his, every once in a while stepping out on the porch, to shade his eyes with his hand and look far away. But here comes mother, now, Bob, and she looks as if she might be carrying a message."

Frank's mother was just the right sort of a wife for a hardy stockman. While she had a sweet disposition, everyone knew that on occasion she could rise to meet an emergency, and several times in the past she had filled the role of a

border heroine. The punchers had the greatest admiration for her, and even roving Indians knew of her bounty.

She always had a bright smile for Bob, of whom she had become very fond, though for that matter the frank-faced Kentucky lad had become a universal favorite on the Arizona cattle ranch during his few months' stay.

"Your father wants you to come to his office, Frank, and bring Bob with you," she now told her son, laying an affectionate hand on his shoulder while speaking. "I think he wishes to tell you a few things that you ought to know concerning the past, and the unfortunate tragedy that overtook one of your relatives long ago."

"Come along, then, Bob," said Frank, as he kissed his mother. "I'm fairly wild to hear what it all means; though between us I can guess now that it is my Uncle Henry. I've always understood that when he died there was some sort of tragedy about it."

Upon entering the stockman's office they found the colonel sitting in his favorite chair, smoking his pipe. Frank closed the door after him, an act that was noticed by the ranchman, who smiled and nodded, as though he fully appreciated his thoughtfulness.

"Sit down close to me, boys," he said, quietly; "I want to say a few things that may explain

what must seem a queer happening to you, for of course you've been wondering who this Don Gonzales can be, and why he would go to all the trouble to send that expedition away up here to rob me of something both of us value so highly. So I've made up my mind to lift the veil of secrecy that has hung over the death of my younger brother, your Uncle Henry, years ago, when you were only a little curly-headed chap of four, Frank."

"Yes, sir," returned the boy, wishing his father to understand that they appreciated his motive, and were anxious to hear.

"I'm not much of a story-teller, boys," pursued the stockman, slowly, "and on that account you'll have to supply what may be lacking. You'll get only the main facts from me. Thread the beads according to your fancy. Imagination will fill it in as you please. It is a sore subject with me, even after all these years, because I feel that those poor young people were cheated out of happiness, and all through the obstinacy and unforgiving nature of that one man, her father, Don Pablo Gonzales."

"Do you mean my Uncle Henry, Dad?" asked Frank, as the colonel paused, and bit the amber mouth-piece of his pipe savagely, while he frowned.

"Yes, he was as handsome and fine a young

fellow as ever drew breath," continued the stockman, reminiscently, "but let all that pass. He had business down in the Mexican state of Sonora, and managed to meet the daughter of this proud hidalgo. I believe he did her a favor, and at any rate it was a case of love at first sight with them.

"It happened, however, that the don held a spite against all 'gringos,' as he termed Americans. It must have dated back to the Mexican War with his family. Be that as it may, he broke up the intimacy between Henry and the little Senorita Juanita, which was her name, and forbade him to see the girl.

"The old, old story over again, lads. True love was not to be denied, and so in due course of time the girl fled from her home and met my brother. They were married by a friendly *padre*, and then fled for the border, pursued by a force of men the angry don sent after them, with orders to shoot the American down on sight, and drag the young senorita back home.

"It was a long chase, and a narrow escape, but the fugitives managed to cross the border ahead of their enemies. That did not prevent the Mexicans from continuing the pursuit, and as a last resort, rather than allow himself to be taken a prisoner or shot, and his bride carried off, Henry must have thrown discretion to the

winds, and started boldly across the desert."

The stockman paused, and smoked on for a full minute as his thoughts roved back over all the years to that sad time. Then once more he took up his story, to which both boys listened eagerly.

"Some of my men found them there while hunting lost cattle. They were both dead, the little senorita resting in his sheltering arms, and every drop of water gone from the flask that lay beside them. As you know, Frank, they lie buried in our little graveyard under the weeping willows near the second spring; but you have never before heard of the tragedy surrounding their taking-off.

"Years afterwards I received a communication from this proud and Yankee-hating Mexican hidalgo. He said that he had learned I was in possession of certain things that his daughter had taken with her when she fled from his hacienda; and he offered me a very large sum in cash, or its equivalent in stock from his great ranch in Sonora, if I would permit him to regain them."

"What do you suppose he meant by that, Dad?" asked Frank, when his father paused again, to puff away at his pipe, and picture past scenes once more.

"I fancied that as time wore on his stony old heart had begun to soften, and that he now bit-

terly repented of what he had done," Colonel Haywood observed.

"And how did you answer his request?" continued the boy, seeing that his father did not appear inclined to say anything further.

"I had never forgiven the old villain," came the reply, "and tearing his letter in pieces I enclosed them in an envelope, and sent that back to him. But three or four years afterwards he pestered me again, this time increasing his offer, and even making out that it was cruel on my part to deny a father such a request. I paid no attention to this demand, believing that he was reaping only as he had sown.

"And finally, it seems, that despairing of obtaining what he wanted in that way, he had to resort to plain robbery. Well, after all, I hope the possession of what he finds in that sealed packet may stab him again and again with the arrows of remorse."

Nothing more was said—at least on that subject—and indeed, the stockman himself started to ask Frank and Bob questions concerning their plans for the immediate future, which would indicate that he did not intend to take them any further into his confidence.

Later on, when the chums were alone, Frank mentioned this fact.

"It seems as though this robbery has reopened

old wounds that had apparently healed long ago," he said. "You can see how much dad must have thought of his handsome younger brother, my Uncle Henry, because it isn't like him to act that way toward an ordinary enemy begging for terms. But I wonder what there is in that package to make the old Mexican don want it so much that he'd hire a lot of men to come all the way up here, and take great risks in order to carry it off."

"The only explanation that comes to me," ventured Bob, "is that it may contain a lot of jewelry."

"You mean that when she ran away the little Mexican girl took with her the family jewels; and that while father knows what he wrapped up in that package, he never intended using them? And at the same time he refused to send them back to her cruel father, thinking he ought to keep on suffering because of his work? Well, we may never know, because I reckon they're in the hands of the old don by now."

"It is a strange story," Bob continued; "and I never thought when I looked at those two graves out there, simply marked 'Henry' and 'Juanita,' that they stood for such a tragedy. After this I'll feel a new interest in them. I wish we could see a picture of the girl your uncle carried off—she must have been pretty."

"That's my uncle's picture hanging on the wall in the sitting room," Frank told his chum; "and perhaps some day, Bob, who knows, you and I might take a notion to run down into Mexico, and visit this cruel old don who was the cause of all the trouble."

"It would be a great thing if we could play tit for tat by carrying off a picture of Juanita and fetching it home to your father, to take the place of the packet he had stolen," suggested Bob.

The idea of some day venturing into Sonora rather took hold upon their young minds. If left to themselves it is barely possible they might sooner or later have projected such an enterprise; but events which came to pass before their minds were fully made up caused this scheme of retaliation to be abandoned.

On the third day after the conversation with the stockman, Frank met his mother coming out of the rancher's private office, with an expression on her face that quite alarmed him.

"What has happened, Mother?" he asked, waylaying her.

"Your father tells me he has received a business letter that will demand his presence in Mexico, at Hermosilla, at once, and he means to start for the railroad at Tombstone by morning. There is so much lawlessness down there, with rumors of another revolution starting up, that I am

dreadfully worried. Still, let us hope for the best, and while he is away you are capable of looking after things on the ranch."

Frank kissed his mother, and then passed out of the house to find his chum, with whom he might talk matters over.

"I am wondering whether this sudden call can have anything to do with the strange things he was telling us about the other day," Bob remarked, after he had heard how the stockman was preparing for a sudden journey across the border.

"Unless dad sees fit to tell us," Frank commented, "we'll never know; but I'll do my level best to run the ranch while he's away, with your help, Bob!"

CHAPTER VII

NO NEWS FROM THE SOUTH

"THINGS seem to be going on all right, Frank," Bob Archer remarked some days later, as he and the stockman's son rode in from the range, where they had superintended the punchers branding a bunch of cattle that had been rounded up in various quarters.

"Yes, that was the second lot of mavericks we've collected since dad left the ranch," replied Frank. "The boys have been hustling to make a record, and I know it'll tickle father when he hears what's been going on."

"No word from him yet; is there, Frank?"

"Not a message of any kind," replied the other boy, with a line appearing across his forehead that told of wakeful nights and much mental anxiety.

"You're bothered some because of it, I reckon," Bob continued. "I've heard you tossing on your bed, when you couldn't get to sleep."

"Well, I might as well tell you that I am bothered some, Bob. You see, that puncher who passed through on his way up to the Pinelano

Range country a couple of days back had just come up from Sonora, and he told me there was every chance for one of those nasty little revolutions breaking out there. I'm afraid dad may run foul of their shooting, and get in trouble."

"Time was," remarked Bob, "when these outbreaks consisted only of heaps of shooting and yelling, with one side running, and nobody hurt; but they say things go different nowadays, and that there's the hardest kind of fighting done, with lots of bloodshed."

"Then, besides, you know how the whole country down there is alive with lawless men who find it easier to make a fair living holding up honest people, than going to work for a living in the mines," continued Frank. "If his business carries him outside of Hermosilla, dad may run against some of that type of Mexican citizens, and you know him well enough to believe he wouldn't stand for being held up without trouble following."

"You don't think his business across the border could have had anything to do with what he told us, Frank?"

"You mean about that old Don Pablo Gonzales? I've thought it all over, and I hardly believe it could be so," Frank replied, slowly and seriously. "Mother said it was a business trip, and that it must be about a big deal dad expected

to put through in connection with the interest held in a new mine he and your father hope to get hold of."

"That might account for it," the other remarked, reflectively, "because I remember hearing uncle say when he spoke of that mine two weeks ago that the man who held the controlling interest lived in Hermosilla. But perhaps when we get back to the ranch buildings we may hear news."

"Yes, Peterkin went for the mail, and should be back by now," returned Frank. "I only hope there's a letter from dad, that's all."

They dug their heels into the sides of their ponies then, as though even the prospect of receiving news caused them to hasten. Shortly afterwards the two saddle boys drew up with a swoop close to the porch that ran along the front of the ranch house.

Mrs. Haywood was sitting there, evidently awaiting the arrival of the boys, for she greeted them with a smile.

"The mail hasn't come yet, Frank," she informed him, "but by using the glass I can see Peterkin coming as fast as he can gallop. He should be here before a great while, surely."

It was perhaps half an hour before the puncher came clattering up, and tossed the mail bag on the floor of the porch. Frank pounced upon it

instantly, and was soon sorting the letters with trembling hands.

"Too bad, Mother!" he said, as he looked up with a disappointed expression on his bright face.

"Then there is no letter from your father, Frank?" she asked, turning a shade paler, and yet striving to appear her own brave self.

"Not a single thing, which I take it is some queer," the boy continued. "Mail can come here from Hermosilla in two days, anyway, and dad's been gone a whole week by now. I must say I don't like it at all."

"Oh!" continued his mother, wishing to ease his mind, for she knew his temperament, "he must have written, and perhaps the letter's been lost. You know how careless they are in everything, those Mexicans. Father would never think of letting us worry about him, I'm sure."

"Here's the paper from Tombstone," announced Bob, "and perhaps it may contain some news."

So concerned was Bob with the troubles of Frank and his mother that he even thrust several home letters away unread, so that he might glance through the little sheet, and see what news concerning Mexico it carried.

A minute later he looked up gravely, to catch Frank's inquiring eye upon him. Bob immedi-

ately made certain signs with his head to indicate that he would like to see his chum alone and at the same time he managed to cause the now folded paper to disappear under his khaki coat.

Mrs. Haywood was engaged reading a letter from Chicago, for she kept up a correspondence with Bob's mother, so she paid no attention when the boys strolled off.

"What's all this mean, Bob?" demanded Frank, when they were alone.

"It did happen, just like you thought it would, Frank."

"Do you mean about father?" gasped the other, turning white.

"Oh! I didn't think of him in that way," Bob assured him, hastily; "what I meant to say was that another revolution has broken out in Sonora, and the whole country is being overrun with soldiers looking for trouble. P'raps the mail trains have been stopped, and that's why you haven't had word from your father."

"I hope it isn't anything worse than that," continued Frank. "Here, let's see what the newspaper says about it."

They were soon reading all that had been published concerning the new uprising in the near-by Mexican state. From all accounts there did not seem to be any doubt but that the distracted country was seething with discontent. Armed

patriots representing both sides were riding through every section, and committing all kinds of depredations.

"It's a favorite pastime with these greasers to start a revolution," said Bob. "They used to have a new one every week, up to the time old Diaz took a firm grip on the government, and choked everything off. Now they've got started in the saddle again, you needn't be surprised at anything."

"That's a fact, Bob," his chum affirmed; "some of the boys, who know the breed right well, inform me that a Mexican is happy if he can just loaf away his time, and play at this patriot business. It gives him the easiest kind of a living, at some other person's expense, and he can pose as a great hero besides, you see."

"Fine!" Frank declared. "But I'd give a heap to know where dad is right now. If I thought he had fallen into the hands of one of those marauding bunches of revolutionists, or some of the bandits that infest every section of Sonora, I'd feel mighty much like proposing that the two of us start right down that way, and try to get him free."

"And believe me," burst out Bob, "you wouldn't have to mention the fact more than once to me. I think a heap of your dad, nearly as much as if he belonged to me, and there isn't

a thing I wouldn't be glad to do, if it was going to help him out."

Frank was growing more and more uneasy over this strange silence on the part of his father, and while trying to make light of it for the sake of his mother, undoubtedly pictured the worst to himself when allowing his mind to dwell upon the subject.

"Your father let that Mexican go free after all; didn't he, Frank?" asked Bob, when an interval of silence had fallen upon them, as they stood near one of the outbuildings.

"Yes," replied the rancher's son, "he said he had recovered most of the money that had been taken, and sending that greaser to the penitentiary would do little good, besides make him lots of trouble, so he just turned him loose."

"But warned him that if ever seen above the border again he might pay dearly for taking chances," Bob continued. "The fellow seemed to be grateful, too, after a fashion, I thought."

"Oh! I don't believe a Mexican knows what real gratitude means," Frank declared. "He was tickled to know he would get off so easy, and that made him say what he did; but the chances are three to one that if he had the opportunity again to steal anything belonging to us he'd do it as soon as shut his eye."

Possibly Frank might find reason to change his

mind about some things before he had grown much older; boys often think they know it all, until something comes along to show them their mistake. Gratitude may lurk within the breast of a dark-faced Mexican, as well as in the mind of his white brother.

"But listen!" exclaimed Bob. "What's all the row about, do you suppose, Frank? I can hear Bart bellowing, and that sounds like Ah Sin entreating him to go easy with him. I wonder, now, if your Chink cook was trying to sneak off, and skip out long before the term of his contract was up."

"There they come right now, and perhaps Bart's looking for me," said Frank.

"Hope he is," added his chum, "for then we'll learn what all the riot and confusion means. But Ah Sin doesn't look all dressed up, like he meant to run away. Chances are Bart pulled him out of the cook house, where he was getting supper ready for the boys."

As a rule, Frank, Bob and the stockman had their meals in the main house, and as Mrs. Haywood looked after the preparation of these herself, they fared much better than the balance of the punchers. There was little complaint found with regard to the Chinaman's ability to concoct "messes," because before his coming on the scene they had suffered from numerous aspiring

chefs, and had gone half-starved in consequence.

Frank waved his hat to catch the attention of the foreman, and this attracting the watchful eye of Bart Heminway he started immediately for the spot where the two boys stood.

"Perhaps they've caught Ah Sin robbing the meat of the fat to make a penny for his savings," chuckled Bob.

"Here you are, you yellow traitor," said Bart, angrily, as he rounded the other up in front of the two boys. "And you'll get the worst licking you ever knew if you don't up and explain where you got this," with which the foreman held up what appeared to be a long-bladed knife, the handle of which was ornamented with a number of garnets and opals.

"What is there about it that you object to, Bart?" asked Frank.

"Why, I'll tell you, Frank, what makes me so mad," replied the foreman; "I've seen that same knife before, and I can swear to it. So can Scotty here, and we'll give you our word for it that it used to belong to that new puncher over at the X—bar—X Ranch, the ugly greaser Peg Grant totes around with him most of the time. So you see, when we find our cook, Ah Sin, carrying the same, we opine that he's been playin' spy here, and that this knife was part of his pay!"

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN FRANK MET PEG

A CHORUS of groans and exclamations from the cowboys told how they felt about the matter. They rather liked Ah Sin for the many good meals with which he had provided them; but still there was not a fellow present but who stood ready to sacrifice his pleasure in eating to running a traitor out of camp. The distrust and hatred for everything connected with that X—bar—X outfit was deep-seated in every puncher's heart who was in the pay of Circle Ranch.

"Hold on, let's understand this thing better, before you start on any rough house business," said Frank, holding up his hand. "Bart, just let go of Ah Sin's rat-tail, will you? And as for you, Ah Sin, look me straight in the eye, and tell me the whole truth about this knife."

The cook ceased trembling now. He even plucked up a little courage, and winked his slant left eye toward the indignant foreman, as if to say: "You see, now I will have a chance to

tell my story without having the words rammed down my throat with the butt end of a gun."

"I find knife, alle samee, Mistah Flank!" he affirmed, solemnly, raising his right hand, and assuming the attitude of a witness being sworn before giving his testimony.

"That's what he was a-givin' us, Mr. Frank," protested the unbelieving foreman; "but shucks! we've cut our eye teeth, we have, and nobody ain't a-goin' to b'lieve Ah Sin nor anybody else is able to pick up knives like that right here in Circle Ranch camp. It belonged to that same Carlos, take my word for it, Frank, and the Chink must 'a got the same for playin' a low-down game of sneak on us."

"No goodee, never play gamee. Find knife—say again—no can makee Ah Sin be sply. Not muchee!" spluttered the cook, pushing up closer to Frank, as though under the belief that he would find the protection he craved in that quarter.

"Did he try to explain to you just where he found it, Bart?" Frank asked.

"Course I asked him that the first thing, and still some more; and every time it's the same old lie. Says he picked the knife up in the hoss corral," the foreman replied, his voice full of unbelief.

Frank turned and gave Bob a meaning look.

"Let's see," he said, hastily, "there may be more in this thing than any of you imagine, just because you haven't been put wise to something that happened recently. See here, Ah Sin, can you remember distinctly just *when* you picked the knife up—that is, what day it was? Now, go slow, and don't make any mistake, because it would upset my trying to clear you if you did. Speak up!"

"Oh longee time ago samee happen; pretty nealy tlo weeks!" the cook affirmed, without the slightest hesitation.

"And why have you kept it hidden ever since?" demanded Frank.

"He was looking at it, and admiring it on the sly when I happened to see him," explained the foreman, grumblingly.

"Flaid somebody say knife b'long to him—that light," replied Ah Sin, with unblushing effrontery.

"Nearly two weeks ago; was it?" continued Frank, as he shot his chum another quick look, as if to call his attention to the fact. "Can't you place the very day it happened?"

"That easy, Mista Flank," came the ready answer; "Fliday it be tlo weeks."

"What makes you so positive, Ah Sin?" asked the stockman's son, grimly.

"Much tell. Fliday Ah Sin him bakes bread,

samee Tuesday. Find flour much low in barrel, want tell boss. Ask puncher—tell Ah Sin find kunnel somewhere in corral. So walkee up, walkee down, lookee for boss, but seem gone. Sun shine on blade knife stick out dust. Plick up, hide in blouse, keep since. No hear any-bloddy tell of lose same, think b'long finder, Savvy?"

"Bob, we might say a word or two to clear the skirts of Ah Sin, don't you think?" asked Frank.

"Seems like it, anyway," replied the other, with a grin.

"Then I hopes as how you'll not keep us all waitin' much longer, Frank," protested Bart Heminway, who was filled with curiosity to know what it all meant.

"In the first place, Bart," began Frank, "think how next to impossible it would be for Ah Sin to enter into a conspiracy with any X—bar—X people. He never leaves camp here except to go with us on a round-up trip, and accompany the chuck wagon in its cruise."

The obdurate foreman refused to be convinced by this.

"But he might sneak out nights, and give them fellers tips on what Circle Ranch punchers was doin'; couldn't he, Frank?" he complained.

"Well," continued Frank, with assurance in

his voice, "for one I'm going to believe that same Carlos was here in our horse corral a week ago Tuesday night, and that somehow he managed to drop his knife with the jeweled handle, and didn't miss it till afterwards. And I reckon since this thing's come up I'll have to tell you something, though dad advised me to keep quiet."

"Wish you would, Frank," urged Bart.

"I sure have thought there was something ailing you two fellers ever since the time Bob's mount broke a leg, and had to be shot," declared Jeff Davis, one of the best punchers of the outfit.

"You've hit on the right nail, Jeff," Frank told him. "What we said about having to shoot Navajo was true, because I knocked him out myself; but there was a whole lot more to that story."

"As what?" asked Bart, eagerly.

"The pony went crazy, and you never saw such carryings-on up to the time he caught his foreleg in that trap, and sent poor Bob flying over his head. He had been eating loco weed, and since for several days Navajo had not been out of the corral, we knew it had been fed to him the night before by some person. Now, we couldn't suspect any of you boys would do such a low-down trick, and the finding of this knife belonging to Carlos makes everything plain."

"He was hired by Peg Grant to come over here and do it!" added Bob.

The indignation of the cowboys was compressed into one great roar.

"He orter to be tarred and feathered!" cried one puncher.

"And rid on a rail!" shouted another.

"If I had my way about it," affirmed Bart, with set teeth, and a dangerous glitter in his blue eyes, "I'd lay a trap, and cotch both them critters, Carlos and his boss, Peg. Then I'd take their ponies, and tie the measly skunks to the same, Mazeppa-like, you know; after which I'd set a bunch of ornery sand spurs under the tail of each hoss and let 'em go. That same is my idea o' what they calls poetic justice."

"I'm afraid it would be a whole lot too severe in this case, Bart," Frank told the aroused foreman. "I'm capable of fixing matters, and getting some satisfaction out of the game. Hold up your hands now, everyone of you, and give me your solemn word of honor you won't try to take my business out of my hands."

Of course they could not refuse, although some hands were raised slowly, as if the owners felt grieved to think they would be bound to keep the peace.

They could hardly conceive a more dastardly thing than to creep up under cover of friendly

darkness, and enter a horse corral, to feed loco weed in bunches of sweet hay to some of the animals.

So Frank took possession of the knife, much to the disappointment of the chagrined Chinaman, who had hoped it would be left in his charge, pending the finding of an owner.

It was the next day when, with Bob, Frank rode to the small hamlet at which they received their mail, hoping that there might be some word from the owner of the ranch, that he suddenly came face to face with Peg Grant, who had evidently come on the same errand as himself.

Peg seemed somewhat disconcerted at finding himself facing his old-time rival; and this in itself seemed significant to Frank.

Just then Frank happened to be alone, since Bob had turned in at a cobbler's to have a little work done on his shoe while waiting for the mail to arrive, it being somewhat late, as usual.

Peg apparently changed his mind, when he saw that he could not avoid a meeting without showing the white feather. Accordingly, Peg once more touched his horse with the spur, and came charging recklessly along the narrow street of the settlement, causing ducks and chickens to scatter wildly, as if a sudden tempest had struck the place.

Frank threw up his hand, cowboy fashion, and

while he hardly knew just why he did it, Peg Grant did pull in his mettlesome pony, until it reared upon its haunches.

"Now, what do you mean by stopping me in that meddlesome way, I'd just like to know, Frank Haywood? Perhaps you think you've got some sort of claim to this village, like you did to Cherry Blossom Mine? Well, if that's so you've got another think coming to you. More than half the place belongs to the firm my father is head of. If we felt like it we could make it so unpleasant you'd never want to come here again. But we don't do things that way; we leave it to you to act ugly. We're satisfied to let you get your mail here, trade at the stores, and ship your old cattle at the station."

"Oh! is that so?" jeered Frank, highly amused at the airs the other boy put on, though he knew Peg so well he could hardly have expected anything else. "Seems to me we ought to thank you for letting us have our share of free air, I expect. I'll tell my dad how kind you all are, and we may send you a letter of thanks some fine day. But I'm glad I happened to meet you, Peg, believe me."

"If that's your way of bluffing, you want to understand that it doesn't go with me," retorted the boy from the X—bar—X, as he sneeringly contemplated Frank. "There isn't a person in

Cochise County you'd sooner go without meeting than myself."

"Oh! you're mistaken, I give you my word for it," Frank continued, positively; "why, as I came into town just now, with my chum, Bob Archer, I remember saying to him what a good thing it would be if I could happen to run across Peg Grant without having to go all the way out to the ranch to see him."

At that the other eyed Frank suspiciously. The frown on his face told that he was taking Frank's assertion with a grain of salt.

"It must have been some *very* important business that would make you want to run across me, I reckon," he remarked, skeptically.

"Just what it was," replied Frank, as he urged Buckskin a trifle closer, so that he could easily lean over and reach Grant if he chose, "and as my chum may be joining me at any minute now, I'll tell you at once what I wanted to meet you for."

"Go on, then," muttered Peg, watching every movement Frank made.

"I believe you have a Mexican puncher up your way by the name of Carlos; haven't you?" asked Frank. "Well, here's something that belongs to him that I want to turn over to you," and with that he drew the knife with the gem-embroidered handle from a sheath in which he

had been keeping it, and handed it to Peg, who accepted it with wondering eyes.

"Why, where did you get this?" he asked, looking strangely at Frank; "I've heard Carlos tell everybody that he'd sooner lose an arm than his knife."

"Then it does belong to your man, you admit?" demanded Frank, with a steely glitter in his blue eyes, and a tightening of the muscles of his cheeks as he ground his teeth together. "I'll tell you where it was picked up. Lying in the horse corral of Circle Ranch, on the morning when one of our ponies, made mad by eating loco weed given to it by some scoundrel who had slipped in during the night, acted so crazed with my chum in the saddle that I had to shoot it. Understand that?"

CHAPTER IX

THE WARNING

"W—WHAT's that you say?" asked Peg Grant, weakly.

There could be no doubt that he had received a shock when Frank threw the accusation in his teeth. It was unexpected, and then again Peg had just been doing some of his customary bragging, so that his descent was unusually swift.

"You seem to have some difficulty in understanding what I said," Frank continued, in the same steady tone, "and so I'll repeat it. This knife, which you admit belongs to your man Carlos, was picked up in our horse corral. It was on the morning of the day a pony ridden by my chum went mad. All the signs pointed to loco poisoning. The pony hadn't been out of the corral for days, so we all knew that someone who wanted to play a low-down trick crept in there on the night before, and left the weed among some sweet hay. You can draw your own conclusions."

Peg was by degrees recovering. The old gleam began to appear in his shifty eyes as he faced Frank.

"Oh! you don't tell me?" he said, sneeringly. "What a wonderful yarn you can get up! It's a pity you don't take a notion to write a book. Found that knife in your corral, did you; and you think our man Carlos bothered taking chances going there to loco some of your ponies? It is to laugh!"

There was not an atom of real mirth in the sound that Peg allowed to issue from between his thin lips. Frank surveyed the other coolly. He had fully expected him to act in this way, and was therefore not surprised.

"I'm not accusing anyone of doing such a low-down trick, remember," he remarked, sternly. "All I want to say is that circumstances make it look mighty suspicious."

"Oh! to be sure; but you wouldn't want to tell Carlos that; would you?" Peg sneered.

"If Carlos was here with you I'd say just what I have. But what I wanted to see you for was quite another thing."

"Go on, then, and tell me," growled the other.

"I felt that it was my duty to tip you off—sort of give you plain warning, to make it plainer," continued Frank.

Peg started and a little of the red left his face.

"About what?" he asked, blusteringly.

"Just this," continued the boy from Circle Ranch. "Carlos owns this knife, and he is not only in the employ of your father, but is known to be thick with *you*. In fact, some of the boys up our way call him 'Peg Grant's shadow,' and they say that if ever you took snuff, he'd sneeze. You understand what that means?"

"Go on," responded the other, his eyes sparkling angrily.

"They all know there's always been bad blood between you and me, and that heaps of times in the past you've tried to get even."

"Oh! sure, I don't deny that part of it," returned Peg, "and I reckon I have touched you up more than a few times, too. But what's our little trouble got to do with the finding of this knife, and one of your ponies going mad, will you tell me?"

"No matter whether it's true or not," pursued Frank, "the Circle Ranch punchers believe you hired Carlos to play that dirty game, and I wouldn't like to answer for your safety if ever they catch you or Carlos within five miles of our place."

Peg was white enough now, though his eyes blazed with venom.

"A lot of cowards, I say," he snarled; "if

they were ten to one they'd like as not shoot at me, and think it fun!"

"If they did it would only be to give you a scare," continued Frank. "But I heard some side talk about tar and feathers, and riding on a rail. One puncher said he'd be willing to tie you and Carlos with your heads to the tails of your ponies, and then put sand spurs under their tails."

Peg looked apprehensively about him. Ordinarily he was no coward, but in this instance guilt doubtless made him fear for his safety. Seeing no band of rough, hard-riding cowboys swinging around a corner he managed to regain a little of his courage, though there was a noticeable tremor in his voice at first, as though his throat and lips were dry.

"They'd better take care what they're doing, that's all, Frank Haywood!" he said. "My father would make things pretty warm for anybody that laid a hand on me, I want to tell you that. And I carry a gun with me, you notice. After this I'll be sure there's always a rifle within reach, too; and you just tell that crowd I'm ready to pull trigger if they bother me. It's easy for you to say I sent Carlos up there, but how can you prove it?"

"I'm not going to bother about it at all," Frank responded. "All I wanted to do was to

give you plain warning that our boys won't stand for any more of this stuff. I feel that I've done my duty in telling you. I hope you'll pass the word along to your friend Carlos, when you hand him back his pretty blade with my compliments."

With the last word he gave Buckskin a whirl, and left Peg sitting in his saddle, still snarling, and looking plainly uncomfortable, for he realized that as usual Frank had managed to get the better of him in an exchange of words.

Bob made his appearance further on, having finished his little business in the cobbler's shop. He must have been considerably surprised to see his chum in close conversation with Peg Grant; but doubtless Bob was able to draw his own conclusions. Since coming to the cattle country he had seen enough of Peg to understand his surly nature.

"Telling him about what happened up our way—eh, Frank?" he asked, as the other joined him.

"Well, as I mightn't run across another chance half as good," replied his chum, "I took occasion to relate a little story about a knife I wanted him to return to its owner, and of course I had to explain just where it was found."

"Did he acknowledge that it belonged to his greaser puncher, Carlos?" asked Bob.

"Oh! I made sure to get him to look at it

and admit that much before I hinted about finding it in our horse corral," Frank replied, as they moved on toward a store where he wished to leave an order.

"I guess he was mad clear through when he saw how he'd tumbled into your trap?" pursued Bob.

"You would have laughed to see him," the other remarked, with a chuckle, "when I warned him that it wouldn't be safe for our boys to find either Carlos or himself inside of the five-mile limit around Circle Ranch. I also happened to mention how some of the punchers were talking about feathers, and tar, and rails. He turned red and white by turns, and I could see that he was shaking as if he had the ague; but whether that came from his being mad, or frightened, I wouldn't like to say."

"What answer did he make, Frank?"

"Blustered as usual, and gave me to understand the plain was free to all, and that he'd ride where he pleased. But between us, Bob, I don't think after this you could coax Peg Grant anywhere near Circle Ranch. It'd take a team of burros to drag him there."

"Well," mused Bob, "I don't know that I'd like to take a hand in any such proceeding, but what I do want to say is this—I think Peg Grant would make an elegant bird!"

Frank laughed at hearing this, and as something chanced to attract their attention the subject was dropped. But all the time they were in the little village he knew that Peg was keeping tabs on their movements, for several times Frank caught glimpses of a face peering at them from around the end of some shack.

"He wants to make sure none of the Circle boys are around," laughed Frank, when even his companion noticed this action on the part of Peg.

"I am wondering whether he expects some of his own bunch to be along," ventured Bob; "and in that case we may look for trouble. It'd be like Peg to want to bluster and taunt us, if backed by a crowd of his own kind."

Nothing of the sort happened, however, for which Frank was grateful. He felt at the time there was quite enough to worry him in connection with his father's absence in the disturbed State of Sonora in Mexico, without having another ranch war break out between the rival punchers.

Again were they doomed to disappointment with regard to receiving some sort of news from Sonora. Mail there was in plenty for almost everybody at home, even Ah Sin; but nothing in the well-known handwriting of the stockman.

As the chums once more swung out of town and started homeward Frank found it difficult

to keep his spirits from drooping. It seemed to him as though some unseen burden was bearing down on his shoulders. Of course this came from the anxiety that oppressed him, because things at the ranch could hardly be moving along better than they were, during the absence of the proprietor.

The invigorating air of the plains as they galloped along did much to draw him out of this despondent mood. Long before they had covered half of the distance separating Circle Ranch from the railroad, Frank was apparently his cheery self again.

Bob knew that matters must be approaching something like a crisis. He understood the nature of his chum well enough to feel sure that Frank would not stand the suspense much longer. Unless word was received soon, it was very likely the stockman's son would propose some daring plan whereby the two saddle boys might start out to learn the truth, no matter what it turned out to be.

"It's a splendid picture, Frank!" cried Bob, as with extended hand he pointed to the white ranch house, partly surrounded by green trees; the corrals, the outbuildings, the lowing herds, and the circling cowboys that went to make up the lively panorama of the cattle ranch ahead.

"Yes, and every time I get home after being

away, Bob, it seems to me there never was and never could be anything equal to it," responded his chum. "But I'd feel a heap better if I knew dad had returned, and was waiting to give us a greeting as we swung in to the porch!"

"Who d'ye reckon that can be over there, heading straight for the house?" asked Bob. "I ought to know every puncher around here, and I certainly never saw him before. Is he Mex., do you think, Frank?"

The other boy looked eagerly, and his face turned a trifle pale as he remarked:

"He does seem to be wearing some of the duds those greaser *vaqueros* like to sport; but you notice he's got yellow hair, and that's what you don't find often among Mexicans. Bob, I wonder——" and a sigh welled up as though some sudden feeling had mastered him.

"What?" demanded the other, still watching the stranger, who was now making a sign with his hand as though meaning to join them.

"Don't you see? He's come from the south, Bob," continued Frank, nervously, "and Mexico lies that way. Oh! what if this stranger should be some messenger sent to us by dad?"

"Whew! I never thought of that!" exclaimed Bob; "but hold your horses; we'll soon know what it means, for here he comes straight at us!"

CHAPTER X

ON TO MEXICO!

"HELLO, boys! will you tell me if that is Circle Ranch yonder?" asked the stranger, as he came up.

Frank had already noted that he was covered with alkali dust, so that both man and pony had the appearance of having come a long journey. This seemed to confirm the suspicion that had leaped into Frank's mind—that he was about to hear news, good or bad, of his father.

"Just what it is, stranger," Bob sang out, seeing that Frank remained silent, apparently overcome by the rush of his emotions, "and my chum here is Frank Haywood, the only son of the owner, Colonel Haywood. Anything we can do for you?"

The sun-burned face of the newcomer broke into a smile. He looked genial enough when he laughed, though the dirt was fairly caked on his cheeks, from flying dust and the dripping perspiration that crossing the burning sands of the desert had brought to the surface.

"Say, let me tell you I'm right glad to meet up with you, Frank," he declared, as he thrust out his hand; "because it happens that I'm carryin' a message to you. This is what I call luck to run across you this way."

"From—my father?" gasped Frank.

He saw the other nod his head in the affirmative, even before he spoke.

"I'm sorry to have to fetch such bad news along," the other went on, "but I gave him my word I'd reach you, if I ever got across the border with my life. A gringo ain't safe any longer down in that country, which is why I dusted out, though I had a fairly decent berth with old Don Gonzales."

The mention of that name, so lately heard under strange conditions, could not but give the two saddle boys a thrill. They naturally connected the wealthy Mexican cattle-raiser and *haciendado* with the disappearance of the Arizona stockman.

"Has he dared injure my father?" Frank burst out with, much to the astonishment of the messenger from over the border.

"I ain't climbing on to the wagon when you say that, Frank," he remarked. "Far as I knows my late boss didn't have anything to do with settin' on them greaser brigands that call themselves rebels—though they ain't—to capturing

your governor. Seems like they attacked a train, and took some of the passengers away to the mountains with 'em, meanin' to force every one to pay a big ransom. That's the way all the thieves down there do. Oh! no, Don Pablo didn't have anything to do with that game; I guess he's shakin' in his boots right now, and fearin' his turn will come next."

While this information may have reassured Frank in one way, it did little to allay his alarm. The worst he had feared seemed to have happened. His father was a prisoner in the hands of bandits. He had heard enough about these border raiders to fear for the safety of his father. Colonel Haywood was apt to speak his mind boldly, and that would bring additional trouble down upon him.

Fortunately Frank was a boy in a thousand. When a blow like this descended, he never crumpled up nor whined, but proceeded to figure out what he could do to change the result. Nothing could be considered hopeless, in Frank's opinion. He always believed that the sun was shining, even if the sky seemed overcast, and that his duty was to keep on until a favoring wind blew the clouds away.

"Who are you, my friend, and how do you happen to have been down in Mexico on that cattle ranch?" he asked the stranger, who was

sitting comfortably, with one knee thrown over the pommel of his saddle.

"Oh! I'm an Ohio boy, and they gave me the name of Buckeye Bud long ago," the messenger answered, with a cheery smile. "I just drifted across the border. Guess I wanted to see how they ran things on a greaser ranch. Then this Don Pablo, after seeing me throw a steer, and do some little stunts with a rope, made me a good offer to work for him. He wanted to improve his force, and introduce some American ideas, you see. I stuck by him a whole year, and wouldn't 'a left now only I saw it was a-goin' to be right unhealthy for gringos down there, once the rebels got to cavortin' around."

The newcomer was apparently "some talker," as Shorty, the Circle Ranch puncher, would have said. Frank, however, could think of nothing except his father.

"Please tell me how it happened that you met my father, that he could send a message by you to Circle Ranch?" he asked, with an appealing look on his young face that must have influenced the newcomer to hasten his recital, since he realized how interested the boy was.

"Why, it was like this," he said. "I happen to know Pasquel, the notorious bandit. By accident I did him a favor one day—saved his rascally life, to tell the truth; though between us,

if I'd knowed who it was in the grip of that quicksand I'd been tempted to make out I didn't hear him yelling. But he told his men when they fetched me in, after I quit the ranch, and started for the good old U. S., that they wasn't to harm a hair of my head, see?"

"Yes, go on, please," Frank told him, as he sat there with clenched hands, listening to the story.

"When I walked around the camp of the so-called rebels," continued Buckeye Bud, "I saw they had nigh half a dozen prisoners. All were Mex. but one, and I got int'rested in him. That was your dad, Frank. He told me who he was, and asked me to take the message to Circle Ranch here in Arizona. And I come through with colors a-flyin', though twice I had a nip and tuck call of it, with bands of roving rebels, 'cause the whole country's gone crazy for fightin'."

"But if you had so much influence with this Pasquel," Frank remarked, "why couldn't you induce him to let my father go free?"

"I did my level best that way, give you my affidavit if I didn't, but the sly old fox wouldn't nibble at the bait," the other answered. "Fact is, he's got an exaggerated idea of your dad's importance, and thinks sooner or later he'll get big ransom money by holding him. He told me he was ready to do anything for me, but his men

wouldn't stand for letting Colonel Haywood, the celebrated Americano stockman, go free, so I had to give it up, and hike for the north."

"Tell me, was dad well? Oh! I hope they hadn't hurt him in any way?" the boy demanded, filled with apprehension, for he knew that if there was anything like a fair chance to organize the passengers of the train that had been stopped, and give battle to the lawless bandits, Colonel Haywood would surely have attempted it.

"N-no, nothing serious," replied the one so lately from Mexico. "He wanted me to get in touch with you, and tell why he hadn't written. You'd have to decide what could be done, because it was out of the question to pay the big sum they talked of asking as a ransom, even if they could send a messenger up here."

Frank turned a look of entreaty toward Bob, who immediately spoke up.

"Count on me to go along, if you decide to make the try, Frank," he said. "I'll stick by you through thick and thin. We've done other things just as bold, and always succeeded. Fact is, we were only a little while back talking of taking a run down across the border, you remember."

"Let's get along to the house," suggested Frank, suddenly, as though his mind had been made up. "When you've had a meal I want you to tell me everything you know about that coun-

try down there, the habits of these bandits, where we'd be most likely to run across Pasquel's crowd, and lots of other things."

"Which, believe me, Frank, I'll be only too tickled to do," said the returned exile. "I'm so glad to get back again to the land of peace that I never want to roam again. I don't take any stock in Mexico. But do you really mean to say you know old Don Pablo, my former boss?"

"My father did, and there was no love lost between them," replied the boy. "I may tell you the story to-night, when we're alone. But I wonder if you knew three punchers by the names of Francisco, Juan and another. They claimed to have stopped at the *hacienda* for several days recently."

"Why, yes, there was a bunch of *vaqueros* who hung around for a time, and the head man bore the name of Francisco, for a fact," Buckeye Bud replied. "They disappeared between days, and I wondered why they didn't hire out with Don Pablo, because he needed help. We reckoned that the times offered too good pickings for enterprising bandits to allow any bold chap to settle down to the drudgery of cattle chasing. Say, you don't tell me they came all the way up here—that outfit?"

"Yes, they were sent by Don Pablo to steal something that he wanted, which my father had

refused to let him have at any price. But you'll hear the whole story later on, Bud. Are you open to an offer to take service on a ranch, because we happen to be short-handed just now, and looking for two good hands?"

"Just what the colonel told me when he was givin' me the message for you, Frank," the roving puncher declared, "and things look so good to me over there that I'm goin' to snap you up when you make me a bid, see if I don't. I'd offer to go back down there with you, only I vowed never to tread the soil of Mexico again as long as I lived, and I never will."

Frank did not feel hurt at this decision on the part of the newcomer. He believed that after they had picked up all the information Buckeye Bud could give them they would be in a position to carry out their plans as well as though he accompanied them.

A short time later the party reached the ranch buildings. When Frank's mother learned of the news that had come in such a strange way from the distant Mexican country, she almost fainted. Still, she was a strong woman, and quickly recovered, so that she took part in the council of war that followed supper.

It was plain to be seen, Buckeye Bud told himself, that Frank Haywood had not inherited all his courage from his father. The lady of the

ranch proved to be fertile in suggestions that were directly to the point, and indeed, turned out to be the best made.

Frank obtained all manner of information concerning both the country and the people. The wandering puncher answered as well as he was able, and often thought of little things that might prove of value to anyone meaning to start on such a dangerous undertaking.

Frank and Bob did not go to bed early that night. There was so much to attend to, in the way of looking after their firearms, seeing that their clothes were in condition for a long and arduous trip, rubbing down both Buckskin and Domino, picking out a couple of led animals that would enable them to make the long and exhausting journey more quickly, and last, though far from least, packing a supply of food such as might best sustain them, because opportunities to do any hunting were not likely to come along. It was nearly midnight when the boys finally threw themselves down to rest.

With the coming of dawn everyone was astir. The last preparations were seen to, good-byes said, and with a parting wave of the hand Frank, followed by his faithful chum, galloped away from the well-beloved Circle Ranch.

CHAPTER XI

STOPPED ON THE WAY

"WE'VE got a big job ahead of us, Frank," Bob remarked, two hours later, as they entered upon the second phase of their journey. They had cut across a rough section of country, after crossing the open plain lying to the south, leaving the hot desert far away on the left.

"But we've always managed to come out on top, you know," Frank told him.

"That's a heap of comfort when you're up against it good and hard," Bob admitted. "It gives you a lot of confidence. What's been done three times oughtn't to knock you down the fourth. Yes, we'll get there, one way or another, Frank."

"I think one of the best things we did was to fetch these extra ponies along," the stockman's son continued.

Bob turned in his saddle, and took a glance behind them. Each led a selected bronco, which had been turned into a pack animal after a fashion. A blanket for each, an extra supply of

weapons and ammunition, a few simple cooking utensils, and a certain amount of food, constituted their stock.

They expected to have to put up with more or less discomforts on the trip, for this was not a picnic, but a stern reality. Still, both of the saddle boys were inured to hardships, and could stand privations without grumbling.

"Yes, it would have been twice as hard to get along if we'd tried to pack all our stuff back of our saddles," the Kentucky boy admitted. "But if all goes well, we ought to be at the border by dark; hadn't we, Frank?"

"That's what I was figuring on, anyway," came the reply. "I've taken the shortest route, except trying to cross the hot sands. That would have exhausted our ponies too much at the start."

"And it's much more comfortable riding through this rough country, where you can get in the shade every little while," Bob continued.

"For one," Frank pursued, "I've had all I want of desert travel. There isn't anything tougher than to find yourself out of water, and surrounded by sand that fairly burns through the soles of your boots."

"I remember this place right well," Bob observed; "because it was close by here I had my little adventure with that panther. You haven't forgotten that time, Frank, and how the hungry,

beast made a spring at me, meaning to land on my back while I was crouching, looking for him in another direction?"

"Sure, I recollect, and I yelled like everything to put you on your guard."

"We've seen some pretty lively adventures together, Frank, even if you have been down here only a short time."

"Well, it strikes me that way, Bob. But, hello! I thought I heard a horse whinny just then!"

"I know you did, because I heard it, too," Bob observed, as he glanced hastily around.

They were in a section of country where it was easily possible for anyone to remain concealed, since there were trees, outlying rocks, and little gullies that hardly deserved the name of *barancas*, though during a cloudburst they doubtless served as watercourses.

"It was surely ahead of us, Frank," suggested Bob, when both boys had, perhaps unconsciously, pulled in their ponies.

"Yes, but since then I have heard something from over to the right that sounded like a horse's hoof striking a stone," Frank continued, and his hand crept toward the repeating rifle fastened to the saddle.

"Could it be cattle rustlers, do you think?" Bob asked, showing signs of growing excitement,

for in recent times the Circle Ranch people had passed through some very unpleasant experiences with border thieves, and the memory of what had happened was still fresh in Bob's mind.

"I was thinking it might be Injuns," Frank remarked. "Every little while, you know, a bunch of young bucks seem to get the fever in their blood, and manage to sneak away from the reservation. They want to see how it feels to live for a while like their ancestors did. We've had trouble with them more than a few times."

"Would they dare stop us, do you think?" asked Bob.

"I wouldn't put it past them," came the reply. "If they think we're only a couple of boys off on a hunt, they might try to rob us. Come, better get your gun handy, you are very likely to need it."

Hardly had Frank spoken than there came a series of shouts.

"Why, they're cowboys!" exclaimed Bob, with a laugh, "and two bunches of them in the bargain, because you can hear the second one back of that little ridge there. And here they come, full tilt. They must have watched us heading this way, and thought to spring a little surprise on us."

The wild yelling kept up, and as Bob had said, it came from two quarters at the same time. The

saddle boys could also hear the crash of horses' hoofs on the hard earth.

Then almost at the same instant both detachments of mounted men came into view. They were undoubtedly punchers, for some were waving their hats in cowboy style, while all wore either leather or sheepskin "chaps."

Frank gave a startled exclamation.

"Why, Frank, it looks like we might be up against it good and hard right at the start!" cried Bob, in dismay.

"That's what it does," replied the other, as he dragged his rifle out of its sling, and pushed the butt under his right arm.

"They must be punchers from the X—bar—X Ranch!" continued Bob. "Yes, and there's Peg Grant in that bunch to the right. Look at the way he's whooping it up, would you? He acts like he's crazy glad to meet with us!"

"I reckon he is," Frank replied.

"What had we better do about it, Frank?" questioned Bob, between his set teeth.

"There's nothing we can do but stay here, and wait for them to come along, Bob."

"But they might think it fun to upset all our plans, and handle us roughly in the bargain?" ventured the other.

"I hope not," Frank answered, tightening the grip on his rifle as he spoke. "When you come

right down to it, some of those X—bar—X punchers are half-way decent fellows after all. I can't believe they'd be so mean as to break up our trip."

"Not if Peg wasn't along, Frank," added Bob, "but I wouldn't put it past him to do anything that was low-down. It's too late to run away now, even if we wanted to."

There was no time for further conversation. The advancing horsemen were rapidly bearing down upon them, still whooping, and making all sorts of extravagant gestures, after the habit of cowboys in general.

There were about four in each detachment. As the Circle Ranch boys surmised was the case, they must have discovered who was approaching, and divided their force in order to have Frank and Bob ride into a trap, from which they could not readily escape unless they turned and fled.

The punchers with Peg Grant, evidently searching for stray mavericks among the out-cropping rocks of this wild section, were no better nor worse than the general run of their kind. Had they been in the employ of Colonel Haywood, and under his severe discipline, they would probably have conducted themselves decently.

It was a different matter when subjected to the demoralizing influence of Peg Grant, whose evil nature was sure to sway these reckless riders.

"There's that Mexican, Carlos, riding alongside of Peg," Bob said, as if that might prove a source of trouble for them presently.

In another minute the riders checked their steeds when apparently on the point of running down the two who sat awaiting their coming.

"What's this we see, boys?" burst out Peg, whose face was aglow with the savage delight he felt at finding such an early opportunity to vent his spite on the head of the one he hated so bitterly. "A pair of innocents abroad, seems like! Looks as if the Circle Ranch tenderfeet might be emigrating to a peaceful country. They're finding things growing too warm around this region, just as I warned them would happen if they kept on bothering me."

Neither Frank nor Bob made any reply. They knew Peg too well to give him the satisfaction of hearing them plead to be let alone.

"Hey! what shall we do with these two babes in the woods, boys?" he demanded, turning toward his crowd with all the airs of a conquering general. "Let's cut their led horses free, to begin with, and send them back toward home on the jump!"

"Whoop! that's the idee, Peg!" roared one of the reckless punchers, evidently considering the adventure in the light of a rough joke.

"Then we'll fire off all the cartridges they're

carrying along with them," continued the Grant boy, brimming over with enthusiasm and meanness. "It'd really be doing them a great favor, because they ain't fit to be trusted with firearms, you know. They were so kind as to tell me what'd happen if ever I rode closer than five miles of their old ranch; now let's settle with Frank Haywood for daring to cross a section of country belonging to the X—bar—X combine! Whoopee! Somebody start things moving."

All their plans were in danger of being ruined. Should these fun-loving, reckless fellows carry out the scheme suggested by the vindictive Peg it would be necessary to defer the intended invasion of Mexican soil for a season, since they must return to the ranch to make a fresh start, and that meant much valuable time lost.

Frank knew they had only one chance, and that a slender one. If he could arouse the latent spirit of fair play which he knew lay dormant beneath the wild and rough exterior of these punchers, all might yet be well.

To do so he must tell them the nature of the errand upon which he and Bob were starting. If he could but evoke one cheer he believed he might yet win the day, in spite of Peg.

It was with this idea in view that Frank raised his hand, and with a movement attracted the attention of the laughing group of punchers.

CHAPTER XII

FRANK WINS OUT

"HOLD up a little, boys, and let me say something to you, please, before you start in with your rough house business!" Frank cried.

"Go ahead then, and hurry up about it!" shouted one of the rough riders, whose pony was prancing at a lively rate.

"You see that we're fixed for a long journey," Frank continued, as steadily as he could, "but none of you can guess where we're really bound. I'll tell you, and appeal to you as American citizens, and lovers of fair play, not to put anything in our way. We're headed for the heart of Sonora, to try and rescue my father, Colonel Haywood, from a pack of greaser brigands led by the bandit Pasquel!"

All manner of exclamations broke out. Evidently the punchers were astonished to hear that the owner of Circle Ranch had fallen into the hands of Mexican brigands, as well as amazed at the daring of these two boys in starting out alone and unaided to attempt the almost impossible task of effecting his release.

"What's all this, Frank?" demanded one of the punchers, Nick Jennings by name.

"Just what I'm telling you," continued the boy, earnestly. "Yesterday afternoon a cowboy by the name of Buckeye Bud, who's been chasing cattle down in the employ of Don Pablo Gonzales, the big Senora rancher, for the past year, came to our place, and told us he had been sent with a message from my father, who was a prisoner of the worst brigands in all Sonora."

"But how'd it happen, Frank?" Nick Jennings asked further.

"The train he was on was stopped, and some of the passengers were taken to the mountains to be held for ransom," Frank told him. "All the others were rich Mexicans, but when they found out who the American traveler was they thought he'd be a big prize, so they held him, too. Now, if you turn us back home after we've made this start, it's all got to be done over again, and you can see what that'd mean in lost time. So I'm asking you to be fair with us. Another time you wouldn't hear a whimper pass my lips. Let us go ahead now to try and reach my father before the brigands change their minds, and do him serious harm. I'm asking that of you as man to man!"

Frank stopped there. He knew when he had said enough, and he wanted his words to strike

home. A brief interval of silence followed, and both boys were in an agony of suspense. Some of the punchers were moving restlessly. Peg was looking as though ready to burst into a derisive laugh, and in this way attempt to discredit the statement of the Circle Ranch boy, while the dark face of the Mexican at his side expressed only the blackest hatred toward Frank and his chum, proving that he had been told about the finding of the knife, and the threat of a warm reception should the Circle Ranch fellows ever catch him on their territory. Then all at once Nick Jennings burst out with a yell.

"That's real American grit for you, boys!" he declared, the manhood within him taking fire. "'Taint every feller among us'd have the nerve to start down into Sonora right now, when it's boilin' with fightin' crowds that ache to shoot each other up, and hate gringos like you an' me does rattlers. I say it'd shore be a shame for us to do anything to hold 'em back. Who's next?"

Another puncher gave a yell.

"I say the same, Nick!" he exclaimed, carried away with admiration for the boldness of Frank Haywood and his chum. "Let 'em have a chanct to win out. 'Tween us I don't ever 'spect to set eyes on these kids again. But we'd be a poor lot to put a spoke in their wheel in the start. Let 'em alone!"

Frank knew that it was all right now. All that was needed in a case of this kind was for someone to take the lead, when the others would follow like sheep going over the fence.

He turned his eyes on Peg. The only chance of a break must lie in this quarter; and he could see that the Grant boy was struggling between conflicting emotions. He hated to give up this fine chance to even the score between himself and Frank, as he reckoned it; and yet it seemed the height of folly to go against the expressed will of the majority of his followers. Peg did not have the soul of a born leader, ready to stand up and cow those who dared to differ with him.

Meanwhile several more of the rough riders had expressed themselves as willing to keep their hands off, and let Frank, with his chum, go their way unmolested. The tide had set in strongly in favor of the undaunted lads, thanks to the manner in which Frank had made his appeal.

So Peg, realizing that things were against him, made the best of a bad bargain. He shrugged his shoulders, and allowed a little sneer to creep over his face. Peg knew when it was time to climb down off his high horse. He also understood how to go with the tide, and appear to still lead.

"OI well, just as you say, Nick; it'd be too hard on these two chumps to stop them, when

they put up such a plea as that; though honestly, I believe they're yarning, and that the old man isn't in the hands of Mexican brigands at all. But let it go at that. If they choose to play the baby act, why, we'll have to be magnanimous, I s'pose. So clear out, you, and thank your lucky stars we didn't happen to feel like eating you up!"

Frank paid not the least attention to Peg, for he knew that had the other not feared a mutiny in his camp he would have persisted in his original plans. Bob, on the other hand, glared at the boy who delighted in saying such mean things; his hot Kentucky blood was doubtless boiling with indignation, though he shut his lips tightly together, and would not permit what was burning in his soul to find expression.

"I want to thank you, boys," Frank said, earnestly; "and I'll remember this, you can depend on it. As you know, we're undertaking a risky thing, but there was nothing else to be done. We may never come back again; but if we don't, you can wager we'll have done the best we knew how. That's all I want to say, boys. Thank you again—so long!"

It was the regular cowboy way of saying good-bye, and the punchers, having had as yet no change of heart, replied with yells, and cheers, and much waving of hats.

"I'm willing to postpone our little affair till you get back from Mexico, Haywood—if you ever do!" Peg was heard to call out, as the two chums rode off, leading their pack animals after them.

As long as they remained in sight of the bunch of riders occasional cheers came to their ears.

"After all, they're not such a bad lot, if only you know how to get to them!" Bob said, though evidently more or less relieved to find that they had passed through the crisis safely.

"You'll nearly always find that's so," his chum remarked. "I've heard Bart Heminway say more than a few times that he could take that X—bar—X outfit and make a decent bunch out of it. All punchers are wild, and apt to get on the tear once in a while. It requires a firm hand to manage them right, and my dad knows how to do it, if anybody does. If I'd said the word, every man on the range would have been willing to go along with us on this trip."

"Which, of course, couldn't be allowed," Bob rejoined, "because, in the first place, they're short-handed even now."

"Yes, and it wouldn't do much good, because once the news got around down there in Mexico that a whole bunch of gringo punchers had broken loose across the border, we'd arouse the enmity of the rebels as well as federals and bandits, so

that in the end we'd find ourselves in a three-cornered fight, with mighty little chance to do anything."

"But you believe that with only two of us, we might slip along without being noticed in particular; that's right, isn't it, Frank?"

"Just what I'm figuring on, Bob," came the reply. "Two can move without attracting much attention, and even hide if it becomes necessary. But just now we couldn't lay plans except in a general way. That will have to be left to the time we get down there in Sonora on Mexican trails."

The shouts of the cow punchers had by now died completely away. Bob looked back several times, and once even suggested that they touch up their ponies.

"Something bothering you, I take it, Bob?" questioned the other, inquiringly.

"Well, you never can tell," came the reply. "That Peg Grant is as changeable as a chameleon. One minute he blows hot, and the next cold. He might feel sorry he'd let us off so easily, and start after us again. I reckon once he gave tongue the tide would swing the other way in a hurry."

"Don't bother," said Frank, with confidence, "we're not going to let Peg and his crowd get in touch with us again this trip, believe me. Once

is all we want to meet up with that X—bar—X lot."

"But if we did sight them putting after us, when then?" persisted the Kentucky boy.

Frank shook his rifle, which he chanced to be still gripping in his left hand, while with the other he manipulated the bridle rein.

"We'd just have to let them know that it was going to be dangerous business trying to stop us, when we had the right of way, that's all."

Hearing Frank say this in such a matter-of-fact way, the Kentucky boy immediately lost all interest in the region behind them. For if Frank was ready to show his teeth and fight, there was no fear of Peg Grant and his crowd stopping them.

"You noticed that greaser; didn't you, Frank?" he observed, shortly afterward.

"You mean Carlos, the fellow who carries that knife with garnets and opals set in the handle? Yes, I saw him scowling like a pirate, and he didn't look any too pleased when Peg agreed to let us move on."

"You don't suppose, do you, that fellow could manage in some way to get news of our intention down to the camp of Pasquel?"

"Oh! hardly; and we don't know of any reason why he'd take the trouble, as far as that goes," was Frank's comment.

"Well, I'd just like to wager," continued Bob, "when Señor Carlos is at home in his native country that's about the sort of occupation he follows. If he hasn't got the looks of a Mexican brigand I'll eat my hat."

"I don't believe we'll be bothered at all in that way," the other told him, "but of course we'll keep a sharp lookout."

At noon they halted in order to give the ponies a resting spell, get a bite of lunch themselves, and let some of the heat of the day pass by before attempting to move along further.

Later on the journey was resumed. Frank had his bearings well in hand, and there was no chance of his losing the way while on the northern side of the border. Of course he could not promise what might happen afterwards. But the vigilance and valor that they meant to show would doubtless win out in the end.

So the eventful day came to a close, and darkness found them taking it as comfortably as possible amidst the elevations that marked the dividing line between Arizona and the troubled republic of the south.

"To-morrow will see us in Mexico, Bob," announced Frank, as they sat by a tiny cooking fire and partook of their simple supper.

"All of which sounds good to me!" was the only comment the Kentucky boy made.

CHAPTER XIII

THE MOUNTAIN TRAILS

It was several days later.

The saddle boys had managed to push far down into the hostile country that was fairly aflame with the fires of revolution. They had been very careful to follow such trails as promised to afford them a screen from possible dangers, so that up to this time nothing of moment had happened.

But it was plain to Frank that they could hardly expect this calm to continue indefinitely. He knew that they had pierced the region where, according to the accounts of Buckeye Bud, the chief bandit, Pasquel, was operating and that in consequence they might expect to run across some of his men at any time.

Although they had managed, through extra caution, to avoid showing themselves to any body of passing riders, they had often hidden in chaparrals and watched such groups of natives swing past. All of these men were heavily armed, and evidently belonged either to the genuine rebel army, or else must be brigands.

Neither of the boys was able to more than guess at this, because the two forces were so much alike in every way.

Then, too, smoke columns had been seen in various localities. These had given them warning that the work of destruction was in progress. Every one of those pillars of smoke stood for some farmhouse, village, or possibly a haystack that had been put to the torch.

"Seems to be getting warmer the further we go—eh, Frank?" Bob asked, on the afternoon of the day when we come upon them again, still with their belongings intact.

"We expected that would be so, you remember," Frank replied, without displaying anything that bordered on anxiety. "And the next thing we hope for is to get in touch with someone who can tell us what we want to know about this Pasquel. If his main camp is still near here, we'll find it sooner or later."

"That's right, we're bound to," agreed the other. "But I haven't forgotten what Buckeye Bud told us about this big land owner, Don Pablo Gonzales, and how he'd been made the Governor of Sonora a year or two ago. Do you think that will be something for or against us, Frank?"

"I wouldn't like to say," came the answer. "I've tried to figure it all out, but had to give it

up as a bad job. You see, there are so many chances of different things happening that it's foolish to calculate. We may be able to do our little stunt, and skip out, without this old don ever knowing that any of the hated Haywood family has been across the border."

"Do you think he'd have it in for your father if he did find that out, Frank?"

"Well, it's a dead sure thing he doesn't bear us any great love," replied the other. "Through a Haywood he lost his only child, thanks to his own ugly nature, and he must hold a grudge against us all. But what's the use bothering about something that may never happen? Just now I'm more concerned about this bandit who's holding dad for ransom, than the old score between the Mexican hidalgo and my family."

"We've come to settle the ransom," remarked Bob, grimly, "only not in the same coin Pasquel would like best."

"No, lead would hardly appeal to him in the same way gold might," agreed Frank.

"It would be a good thing for the country, I believe, if we found it necessary to bowl over old Pasquel while we were about it," Bob continued, reflectively. "A brigand of his type can destroy more in twelve months than a small army would. He often burns and pillages just because the spirit is in him. For some years now the

people over in Arizona have been hearing terrible stories about his doings. I've pictured him myself as an ogre, about seven feet tall, and looking like some of the pictures we used to see in the colored story books about Jack the Giant Killer."

Frank laughed.

"Well, you must have caught your breath then, when Buckeye Bud told how the fierce and dreaded Pasquel was only a whipper-snapper of a fellow, but every ounce of him panther from the word go—a regular little fire-eater?"

"I had hard work to believe it at first," Bob admitted; "but since then I've been picturing him that way, and by now I've got it down pat. But, Frank, will we have to hold up here, or turn aside, because unless I miss my guess we're running smack into one of those foraging parties, up to their nasty tricks? Listen! wasn't that a woman screaming, or could it be pigs squealing?"

They had pulled up sharply, so as to bend their heads and listen better. As the sound was repeated, Frank had a good chance to make up his mind concerning what it was.

Immediately his face took on a serious look. He had laid out his plans, and they did not contemplate any contact with the bandits immediately. Such an event would most likely spoil

their calculations, and set them adrift. Still, Frank had a warm heart, and he never had been able to stand idly by when anyone appeared to be in distress.

"It was no pig, that's sure, Bob!" he announced, quickly.

"Then it must have been a woman crying out!" declared the other, indignantly.

"Nothing else; and the question is, are we going to turn to one side and slip past without taking a look in? Perhaps the rascals may be too numerous for us to show our hand, and we'll have to shirk the job. But surely we ought to find that out before deciding. Are you on, Bob?"

"Every time, Frank. I think the same way you do."

"Then come along, let's move ahead!"

They did not rush heedlessly on. The sounds they had heard consisted of shouting, and a continuance of a shrill shrieking such as a distracted woman might be expected to give utterance to when badly frightened. And presently they discovered smoke rising in dense clouds, which told them that their first supposition was the true explanation.

"It must be the brigands at work!" said Frank positively.

"Still, they say that the rebels are just about

as bad," Bob declared, "and will only too gladly wipe out a family they have reason to believe sympathizes with the government at Mexico City."

Both boys had unslung their repeating rifles. They were now holding these with a business-like air that announced their full intention of using them should that course be thought advisable.

The trees grew quite densely ahead of them, which was the main reason they had not been able to see anything of what was taking place.

"In about another minute we'll know," said Bob.

"Easy. And the racket seems to grow right along, rather than let up," Frank returned.

"There goes another shot!" ejaculated Bob. "De you think they're murdering everyone at the place?"

"Well, no, I hardly think they are," replied the other; "they haven't stopped that woman from yelling, you notice. I rather think they let off a shot every once in so often to sort of warn their victims against showing any spunk. Say, she'd make a good alarm bell; wouldn't she, Bob?"

"She's a daisy, all right, Frank. But suppose we decide to charge down on the raiding bunch, what about our pack ponies?"

"We'll throw their ropes over some branch or rock, and go it alone. Be sure to ride for all you're worth, and yell to beat the band. It's noise more than anything else that beats this kind of people. Besides, if we beckon back of us they'll be apt to think we've got a dozen or two other fellows trailing after. Get that?"

"Yes, and it's a good idea, too. Let's save our wind now so as to make a right good noise when we start in."

"Slow up here; we're right on the place where we can see!" warned the ranch boy, suiting his action to his words.

Watching his chance, Frank wound over a stout limb the end of the trail rope by which his pack animal was being led.

"Ready, Bob!" he called out, sharply.

Bob had lost no time in following the example, so that by now both pack ponies were secured, leaving the others free to attempt the programme that had been so hastily arranged.

"On deck, Frank!" his cheery response sounded.

"Then let go!"

As they swung out from behind the shelter of the intervening bushes, with a clear field before them, it was easy to understand the cause of all the noise.

A house, or more properly speaking a hut,

such as most Mexicans of the lower classes live in, was on fire. Several native men were brandishing machetes or guns, and evidently trying to frighten a big man, perhaps the master of the habitation, who was well along in years, as his white head showed. Two more of the same breed were standing in front of a small woman, who kept them at bay by frequent stabs with a long knitting needle, all the while emitting a series of piercing shrieks that made the echoes ring.

At that one look Frank counted four of the bandits. He was feeling so worked up over the cowardly methods of these raiders that had there been half again as many he would not have hesitated about giving the same order.

"Now, rush them, Bob!" he told his chum, hurriedly. "Shoot wild, and yell all the time! We don't want to really kill anyone, but if you have to draw blood, take snapshots at their legs and feet!"

"Whoopee! Frank! Here we go!" and entering whole-heartedly into the idea proposed by his chum, Bob began to test his voice by uttering all sort of wild cries, such as he had heard cowpunchers indulge in, with various embellishments of his own.

Frank on his part did not forget to turn several times in his saddle, and wave his hand, as

though urging the main body of rescuers to the spot.

They did not know what to think of it all, those men thus suddenly disturbed in their work of pillage. Bob had already commenced to discharge his rifle.

The two lads afterwards decided that when making that aggressive rush they must have outdone their best previous efforts in the way of kicking up a racket. It at least seemed to have some effect upon the raiding party, because they could be seen dashing this way and that, uttering loud cries of astonishment, and giving every evidence of alarm.

"They're going to run for it, Frank!" cried Bob, halting in his series of whoopings long enough to note symptoms of panic. "We've got that crowd on the jump, Frank, if only we keep 'em going!"

With this idea in view Bob tried to outdo all his previous efforts, and shouted himself red in the face.

"They're on the run, Frank!" he bellowed. "Chase 'em, sick 'em, go for 'em everybody!"

The brigands were now in full flight. They fired several random shots back at the two boys as they sped madly away, and Bob heard the spiteful hiss of lead passing over his head; but in another minute the coast was clear.

CHAPTER XIV

SURROUNDED BY PERILS

"THEY'RE all gone, like a wreath of fog in the early morning sun, Frank!" declared Bob, exultantly, as he and his chum drew in their horses.

Frank did not display any great amount of enthusiasm over the hollow victory. Perhaps he was wondering whether the old couple they had rescued were worth risking their lives for; or it might be he could see further than his chum, and wondered whether they might not have to pay a reckoning later on for what they had done.

The woman, who had by this time stopped screaming, came up to where the two young Americans sat astride of their ponies. As for the man, he was shading his eyes from the sun, and looking intently in the quarter from whence the boys had come. Undoubtedly he wondered greatly because he failed to see a whole troop of the gringos gallop into view.

"No use trying to put out the fire; is there, Frank?" asked Bob, as he pointed in the direction of the burning cabin.

"We couldn't do it even if we tried," was the answer, "and I'm doubting a lot whether it'd pay. You know these peons hardly ever own anything except the clothes on their backs, and mighty few of those in the bargain."

"That settles it, then," returned Bob; "but here comes the Mexican nightingale. I wonder she didn't crack her voice with all that screeching."

The native woman must have in some way guessed that Frank was the one she ought to address. It was strange how so many persons took this for granted; though perhaps he did have some mark of distinction about him that was noticeable.

In this case it was the wisest thing she could have done, because as it happened she was not able to say more than a few words of broken English, while with Bob the opposite held good, for Spanish was next door to an unknown quantity in his book of knowledge. But Frank could talk it like a native of the soil.

Bob, happening to notice something that seemed to call for attention in connection with his saddle girth, jumped to the ground, and busied himself for several minutes until he had completed the necessary repairs. Then, upon looking up he saw that Frank and the woman had stopped talking. His chum was coming to-

ward him, leading Buckskin by the bridle, while the woman had started toward the still burning shack.

"You wouldn't think that was much to cry over, now; would you, Frank?" Bob proceeded to ask, hardly realizing what the loss meant to the old woman.

"It's the only home she's got," Frank told him, "and means more to her than the palace of a millionaire would to him. But she gave me a piece of news that sort of knocked out my calculations, Bob."

"Nothing bad about your father, I hope, Frank?"

"Oh! no, nothing in that direction," the other replied. "It was only a disappointment, that's all. If we'd known it before we might have acted along different lines."

"Are you referring to the bunch that skipped out of here so fast?" asked Bob.

"More particularly to the little man on the big roan who shrilled all sorts of angry threats as he fled, and shook his fist at us so savagely. Guess who he was, Bob."

"Not Pasquel himself, Frank?"

His chum nodded his head, to indicate that, startling as the thing seemed, it was really a fact.

"She told me so," he continued, waving a

hand toward the woman of the shack, "and also warned me that he would surely gather up some of his fighting men, and return here, to pay us back for the scare we gave him. That's the kind of man he seems to be, revengeful and resourceful. And I wouldn't wonder if he could gather a hundred men inside of a few hours, because she says the country is thick with them, with here and there a bunch of the genuine rebels heading for some recruiting station."

"That sounds interesting, Frank. Seems like we'd better make hay while the sun shines, and clear out of this before Pasquel returns in force."

"Just what she said to me," continued Frank. "She seemed to be human, after all, and felt a little bit of gratitude because we ran the enemy off before they'd had time to finish her old man. Look at him, still standing there, and rubbing his eyes as if he didn't know whether it's all a dream or not. But we'd better be getting our pack ponies, and starting off again."

"I wish we could hide our ponies, to let them get a rest after all this hard riding, and use the led animals for a while," Bob grumbled. "Chances are we might need a good fast mount in a hurry, and with our own used up, where would we be if we depended on the pack horses?"

"We've talked that over before, you know,

Bob, and decided on just what we'd do under certain conditions."

"Yes, and you think that time has about come; don't you, Frank?"

"I took the trouble to explain it all to the woman, even asking her if she could coach me how to reach the main camp of the brigands. She told me all she knew, and while that isn't going to help us much, I did learn of a good place where we can leave our ponies until we want them."

"Bully for you, Frank!" exclaimed the Kentucky boy, with a look of pride at his chum.

"She told me she had heard it said that Pasquel did have a number of prisoners up at his mountain stronghold. Her old man, who at odd times I imagine has been a member of the gang himself, had told her he even heard some wild story about a scheme to abduct the governor of the state, Don Pablo Gonzales, and hold him a hostage to prevent the execution of several of the bandits who have fallen into the hands of the authorities, and are in danger of being shot."

"That's the common way of doing things down here; isn't it, Frank? They never bother with a hangman, and nobody ever heard of an execution by electricity. But I only hope we don't have a chance of trying it on, that's all."

"Here's with you on that, Bob. But come along, and we'll recover our pack animals. One of those thieves might be hovering around, you know, and happen on our stock. A fine state of affairs that'd be for us—eh, Bob?"

"Don't mention it!" pleaded the other. "A whole week, p'raps two, and never once a drink of coffee, or a bite of salt pork! Deliver me from such a fate as that. Why, I think I would die for want of something to eat."

"There's where we tied the pack ponies," Frank remarked, a minute afterward.

"Yes, and let me tell you I guess we didn't get back a bit too soon!" cried Bob, excitedly; "say, didn't you see a man jump into that clump of bushes yonder? He was making straight for our ponies when we broke through. If we hadn't come when we did, chances are we'd have lost our packs."

Frank, too, had glimpsed the vanishing figure. He suspected that it must be one of Pasquel's band, sent back to play the spy. There was no telling but what the fellow would open fire upon them, screened as he was by the sheltering brush, and until they had untied the pack ponies and started away, Frank's nerves were on edge.

Had such a thing occurred he was in a humor to turn in the saddle and send a swarm of leaden pellets through that same patch of brush.

No report came, however, for which Frank was grateful. They rode some distance away, covering a couple of miles.

"This must be the place she told me about, Bob," Frank suddenly remarked. "Yes, here is the blind gully, and by making a sharp turn we'll come to what looks like a rocky wall; but she says there's little trouble removing some of the stones, after which we can lead our ponies in, and leave them, riding off on the pack animals."

"Sounds like a fairy story, Frank," objected Bob, shaking his head, "and even if it were true, and something should keep us away for a few days, how would Buckskin and Domino get anything to eat or drink?"

"Oh! she explained all that to me, you know, Bob. There's a little valley the blind pass leads to, which she says only herself and her old man know about. Perhaps he used it now and then to hide some animal he'd cribbed. But that's nothing to us, you know, so long as there's water and grass for the horses. Let's have a try and see what it amounts to, anyway."

When, a little later, Bob followed his chum through the narrow passage, leading Domino and the pack pony, he was astounded to discover that it was no cheat at all, but a reality. The miniature valley was there, and so far as they could discover it did not seem to have any exit save

the one that could be so readily blocked by piling up those rocks they had thrown down.

"It beats anything I ever heard tell of!" Bob admitted, "and I wouldn't be surprised if what the old woman said is true, and that nobody but she and her man ever saw the inside of this retreat."

They did not mean to linger any longer than they could help. For that reason it was necessary that they get busy making such changes as they thought necessary, before quitting the hidden stockade.

A few things were to be taken along, but for their blankets and extra weapons they found a safe hiding-place.

"There's no telling," Bob remarked, as they secreted these, and marked the spot so that they could easily find it again, "what may happen to us, and if we lost what we're carrying, this *cache* would come in mighty handy."

"Yes," Frank added, "it's like insuring your house. You don't expect it to burn down, but if it does you want something to cover your loss."

The two ponies were allowed to roam in the enclosure at will. The boys did not entertain any doubt that they would be found there when wanted, and in good condition for further service.

Mounted on the led animals, they once more started onward. Frank had kept track of all the information he had been able to pick up from various sources concerning the possible main camp of the bandits under Pasquel. He meant to circulate around in the vicinity until night fell, when he and Bob would try to approach closer to the suspected quarter.

Plans are all very well, but Frank had seen more than one occasion when the best arranged schemes were subject to sudden changes. It happened so in this case, and the first indication was when Bob made a discovery.

"They're after us, Frank," he called out to his chum, who happened to be a couple of lengths ahead of him. "I just saw a horseman dash past that open place back where we made the turn; and there go others. It means a hot chase for us. We've either got to throw them off our trail, or else be overhauled, and forced to fight!"

CHAPTER XV

OVER THE EDGE

"CAN your cayuse stand a harder push, Bob?" asked Frank, after he had turned his head, and confirmed the discovery made by his chum.

"He seems to be laboring a little, but with the quirt I might get something more out of him," was the reply.

"Then whoop her up, for here they come after us!"

Their pursuers apparently knew they had been discovered, and that it was no longer possible for them to gain ground through secrecy. They started whipping their mounts, shouting savagely as they came along.

There was considerable distance between pursuers and pursued, which proved a source of comfort to Bob. He did not have a great deal of faith in the sprinting abilities of the spare ponies, certainly not what he would have felt had he been mounted on Domino.

"We seem to be holding our own, Frank!" he called out, a short time later.

They were really making good time, considering the rough nature of the ground, and there was occasionally a difficult path to be followed that led along the edge of a steep descent.

"Seems like it," came from over Frank's shoulder. He was in the lead, and had his attention taken up so much with watching to see what lay beyond them that it allowed scant opportunity to look back.

"I only hope this pony doesn't stumble!" added Bob.

"Why, what makes you say that?" demanded his chum.

"He seems so clumsy, that's all," Bob told him. "Three times now he's come mighty near taking a header. I have to dig my knees into his sides to keep from being pitched over his head. I think he interferes when spurting over broken ground."

"Queer we didn't notice that before!" Frank continued.

"Oh! don't bother about it, Frank; I'll manage to keep on somehow. I've ridden all sorts of horses, you know, and can usually hold my own. But do you think we stand a fair chance to get away?"

"I reckon so, if we can hold out another hour, and nothing serious happens."

"An hour, you say, Frank; then you pin a lot

of faith on the coming of night; don't you?"

"It will give us a chance to hide, anyhow."

"They're some of Pasquel's crowd, I take it?"

"All greasers look alike to me just now!" Frank exclaimed; "and I reckon all gringoes are one to them. They hate Americans like poison. Bandits or rebels, I'm thinking we don't want to come to grips with that ugly bunch. Watch your pony's feet here, Bob; it's getting pretty risky riding, and we don't know our mounts any too well. Careful, I heard that slip then!"

"Wow! he nearly got me that time, I tell you!" Bob cried. "Slipped on a rolling stone, and just hung on the edge of that gully. Only that I threw my weight on the other side, and sort of held him up, I believe the ornery beast would have gone over the edge."

"Keep your feet free to draw out of the stirrups in a hurry if anything happens," cautioned Frank, as he put his pony straight at the new task that confronted them.

It was a comfort to know that while they were meeting with these difficulties their pursuers were not free from similar troubles. Indeed, twice Bob, on turning his head to see what the prospect of their being overtaken might be, chanced to witness what looked like a catastrophe.

"Whoop! there goes another of the bunch, taking a header over the edge, shoved right off by the crush!" he shouted, suddenly, unable to restrain his exultation. "Let me tell you if they keep that up right along we'll soon find ourselves free of pursuers without waiting for night."

"Here's another tough place, Bob!"

"I'm on guard, give you my word, and the pony seems to be doing a shade better just now, glad to say!" Bob called back, as he devoted himself to the task of guiding his mount past the danger point.

Every minute counted. The seconds seemed to fairly drag along, in the estimation of the Kentucky lad. He shot many an appealing glance up at the heavens, as though wondering whether there could be a modern Joshua anywhere around, commanding the sun to stand still, for it did not seem to sink any nearer the ragged line that stood for the horizon.

Bob had stopped calling out now. He found that he had need of all his breath and energies in trying to carry his clumsy pony over such difficult places as were continually cropping up. It was getting more and more broken the further they went, and Bob even began to figure out whether after all they would not be showing good sense to come to a halt, drop behind some rocky barricade, and try to hold the enemy off.

They had their repeating rifles, and knew how to use them. Of course it was to be expected that as soon as the firing began those who had been so wildly chasing after them would throw themselves out of their saddles, and take refuge amidst the rocks.

Frank, however, seemed disposed to stick it out longer. He knew they were holding their own so far, and every minute the chase kept up added to the chance of leaving their pursuers in the lurch.

Once, when they came upon a little stretch of level ground, they even increased their lead. This looked encouraging, though of course it could be but a temporary gain. When the enemy struck the same level ground they, too, picked up, while the fugitives, happening to be on another rough stretch, seemed to fall back again.

"Another half-hour ought to see it beginning to close in!" Frank called out, as though seeking to give his chum all the encouragement he could.

"Glad to know it, Frank! Something ought to happen before a great while to give us a lift. My pony's getting groggy again, sure as you live. Wheel! I just caught him that time, for he was trying to scrape me off against that rock. He's a wicked sort of a cayuse, believe me. Try that game again; will you?"

The sound of a quirt falling repeatedly on

the flank of Bob's mount told how he meant to emphasize the fact that he was master of the situation, and meant to be obeyed.

In other days the chums had engaged in many a wild race, but their record hardly contained anything to equal this. As a rule, these runs had taken place over the level plains, or the burning sands of the Arizona desert. Now they were in the broken country of mountainous Sonora, traversing unknown trails, and uncertain what sort of a surprise the next minute might spring upon them.

Frank did not like the idea of running away from those wildly shouting horsemen any more than did the high-spirited Kentuckian; but he had a level head, and knew the benefits of a cautious policy.

The near approach of night caused him to persist in trying to keep ahead of the enemy. Once it became too dark to maintain this flying speed, he believed they could elude their pursuers without much trouble.

His one great fear lay in the direction of Bob's pony. His own animal seemed to be doing unusually well, so that he had little fault to find; but Bob apparently had picked out an animal that could not be wholly trusted. That was something that could not be remedied at this late date. They must hope for the best, and

keep trying to do all that was possible in order to pull through.

In the beginning there had seemed to be quite a host of riders chasing after them. Some of the accidents which Bob had noted with such glee may have cut down the number, but not to any appreciable degree, in spite of Bob's hopeful figuring.

"Why doesn't Frank turn on 'em?" Bob asked himself, as he felt his arms growing numb from the tremendous strain of holding his pony by main strength, as it seemed. "I'm afraid I won't be able to stand this till dark comes. I'd like to see well enough to do some shooting. What's the use of owning a gun if you never use it?"

Frank, however, did not manifest the same spirit. He seemed satisfied to let well enough alone. They were holding their own, so what was the use of changing their programme unless compelled to pull up?

From time to time shots had sounded in the rear, as some pursuer found an opportunity to use his weapon. All this bombardment must have been useless, for while on several occasions the boys could hear the whine of a bullet passing overhead, and once a missile chipped a rock close by, they did not seem to be in actual danger of being struck, unless by accident.

The boys had struck another stretch of bad country where the going promised to be hard work, and dangerous as well. On one side they often found a wall of rock rising up high above their heads, while the other consisted of a sheer descent that made Bob dizzy.

Loose stones added to the risk. Frank called out twice to warn his chum of perils that caught his eye, and possibly he may have saved Bob by so doing.

The time came, however, when that uncertain quality in Bob's pony brought about sudden disaster. Whether the clumsy beast stumbled, or a rolling stone did the mischief, no one ever knew.

Frank's heart seemed to leap up into his throat when he heard the scrambling sound behind, for he realized that it was as bad a place for the pony to develop a weak point as any they had so far come across.

He immediately pulled in his own animal, meaning to dismount and go to the assistance of his chum, should it turn out that Bob was in need of help.

The scrambling had meanwhile ceased, though it had been terribly significant while it lasted. Then came a heavy sound that struck a chill to Frank's heart, for he knew in an instant that in all probability the pony had done what his actions of the past had long threatened—fallen

over the brink of the precipice that lay alongside the trail.

When Frank managed to get clear of his own mount, and looked back, he could hardly believe his eyes. There was not the slightest sign of either pony or Bob. The rough mountain trail stared him in the face, but whatever tragedy had been enacted, nothing remained to tell the story.

Filled with horror Frank ran back until he found himself on the spot where the stumble had taken place, as he could see by the marks on the rock. He had to grit his teeth, and draw a full breath to summon courage enough to creep forward to the verge and peer over.

CHAPTER XVI

THE VALLEY HIDE-OUT

"FRANK, hurry up and lend me a hand!"

That surely was the voice of Bob! To Frank it seemed the cheeriest sound he had ever heard, for it told him that his chum had not gone down with his unfortunate pony.

He hesitated no longer about looking over the edge, and there he discovered the Kentucky boy clinging desperately to the rough face of the rock. He was some six feet below, and Frank could not reach him.

"Hold on, Bob!" he sang out. "Can you stand it till I get my rope?"

"You bet I can; but hurry, Frank. I'm afraid my hands might slip, and I don't seem able to find any hold for my toes!" Bob called back.

Frank was off like a shot, and soon came back again with his rope. Upon this being lowered to the clinging boy, he managed in some fashion to get the loop around his legs, and then Frank drew it up under his arms.

It was all right then, and with one scrambling

the best he knew how, and the other dragging at the rope, Bob managed to climb back to the trail.

"Whew! that was going some, I tell you, Frank!" he gasped. "It was the luckiest thing that ever happened to me that I managed to grab a knob of stone. I had my feet free of the stirrups, too, you know, or I'd have been carried down along with the pony!"

"We mustn't wait here any longer!" exclaimed Frank; "already those fellows back there must have gained a heap of ground. Here, climb on my pony."

"Will he stand for double, I wonder?" Bob asked.

"He's just got to, and that's all there is about it," Frank told him.

The mounting was done in hot haste, for every second was precious, with the Mexican bandits tearing along the trail the boys had so recently passed over.

Bob sat behind, and clasped his arms around the waist of his chum, who had to devote his attention to guiding his pony, and getting as much speed out of him as possible. The Kentucky boy was not feeling very happy. In the first place, he had received several bruises that smarted more or less. Then again, with the lost pony had gone his rifle, as well as a saddle he

valued highly. If it came to a fight now, he would find himself handicapped.

As they pushed on steadily if not swiftly, Bob discovered that it seemed as though dusk had started to settle down. The sun was hidden from sight behind a lofty peak that stood up from the mountainous ridge, and in the valley shadows had commenced to creep out of their hiding-places.

They could hear the cries of their pursuers, but it was no longer possible to catch a glimpse of them, showing what the gathering gloom was doing to render assistance to the two fugitives.

"Here's where we want to drop out of the race, Bob!"

With these words Frank brought the pony to a stand, and jumped from the saddle. Bob was afoot almost as soon, pleased with the chance to stretch his cramped muscles.

"Come, we'll turn to one side and disappear," Frank whispered. "We can find a place to lie low until they've swung past. Then we'll look around, and hit on some spot to spend the night, or the best part of it, for we ought to be away before morning."

This suited Bob. He only regretted that he had lost his rifle, which would come in mighty handy, should they be forced to fight. Still, he

felt so thankful for his escape that he would not complain.

Frank led the pony, and picked out the way he wanted to go. Fortunately there happened to be plenty of opportunities for hiding, what with the bushes, and the scattered rocks. Closer came the sound of voices, telling them that the brigands must be picking their way along, in the hope of overtaking those they had been pursuing.

"We ought to be safe here while they pass," Frank said, as they crouched in the shelter of the bushes.

"How about the pony?" Bob asked him. "He might give a whinny when the other horses come along, and spoil it all."

Apparently this danger had not occurred to Frank, though as a rule he was quick to grasp everything. He uttered an exclamation, and whipping off his jacket hastened to wrap it about the head of the pony, meanwhile patting the animal on the neck, so that it might not start to struggle, and in this way betray them to the enemy.

It was a critical moment, and Bob held his breath. But the passing horses made so much clatter on the rock with their hoofs, and the riders called out so frequently that all other sounds were drowned.

Only by the gradually decreasing noise could the two boys tell that the peril had passed.

"They're gone, Frank!" whispered Bob, laying a quivering hand on the arm of his chum.

"Seems like they had," returned the other, in the same cautious tone; "but I'll just keep this over the pony's muzzle a bit longer, to make sure."

Presently, when they could no longer catch the sound of voices or the clang of hoofs, Frank put his jacket on again.

"That was well done, I want to tell you," Bob declared, filled with admiration for his comrade, whom he had seen tested under all sorts of strange conditions, until he was coming to believe that Frank was capable of handling almost any difficulty.

They pushed on slowly, leaving the trail behind them. The darkness was now becoming so dense that it was with the utmost difficulty they could see to pick their way among the obstacles that lay before them.

"We're in a sort of valley, I take it, Frank," ventured the Kentucky boy, after this sort of progress had been going on for some time.

"Yes, and at the first patch of grass we happen across we'll pull up."

"Want that to keep the pony busy, I take it," observed the other.

"Just what I do," Frank rejoined; "and then it might make us a softer bed than hard rocks. I can stand for a heap, when I have to, but I never did take much stock in sleeping on stones."

"We'll have to munch a little grub ourselves, I should think," suggested Bob.

"It'll have to be a dry supper, then, because we haven't got a drop of water along with us, and I haven't so far heard any trickling through this valley, though you'd expect to find some sort of a stream around."

"Well, here's your grass, Frank, and for one I'm glad of it."

"Tired, are you?"

"Why, yes, I am for a fact," replied the Kentucky boy. "I reckon I must have strained myself some when I fell, and got a few bruises besides. Do we pull up here?"

"Yes, and I'll stake the pony out to begin with. He's crazy to get at the grass, you notice."

"Well, make sure to strip him of everything, because if he broke loose and carried off what little food supply we have along we'd be in a nice pickle; wouldn't we now? It was bad enough losing what I had fastened back of my saddle. Makes me mad every time I think of that business."

"Don't complain, Bob; it might have been

much worse. I think you were lucky not to go down with the cayuse."

Bob must have felt ashamed at having uttered his complaint, for he stopped at once and simply sat on the grass while Frank found some object to which one end of the lariat could be fastened.

Already the stars were peeping out in the heavens above. Crickets were fiddling in the grass close by, the presence of which would apparently signify that at times there must be more or less moisture in the valley.

Frank had taken the precaution to remove everything from the back of the pony. This consisted of the saddle, his repeating rifle, and a bundle which held some food. They did not dream of such a thing as starting a fire, no matter how tiny; nor for that matter did they have anything to cook.

Sitting there, shrouded in darkness, Frank opened this package, and handed his chum some of the contents. There were crackers and cheese, as well as some slices of dried meat—not a very appetizing supper, but acceptable to hungry boys.

As they munched they talked in low tones. Of course their situation concerned them most. Matters had taken a sudden and unexpected turn, so that their carefully made plans were disarranged.

"Pretty tough grub, for a fact; isn't it,

Frank?" Bob remarked, when his jaws began to weary, so hard was the smoked beef brought from the ranch, and which, when properly cooked, would have made a fairly palatable dish.

"We mustn't run things down," replied the other. "Of course this sort of thing would seem pretty hard as a regular diet, but we can stand it once in a while. Better times are coming, when we can have coffee and bacon and the kind of grub we like, even to your favorite fried onions."

"Oh! please don't rub it in, Frank," pleaded the other; "I'm going to tackle this stuff again in a little while, because I need more of a supply so as to hold out. But what will we do when morning comes? Unless that bunch has galloped clear out of the valley they'll be sure to see us. We can't get away with only one pony between us. I hope you'll say our best game would be to go back to where we left Buckskin and Domino, and start out fresh."

"Either that," Frank observed, thoughtfully, "or else let this mount go, too."

"Do you mean that we might carry on the search for the headquarters of this Pasquel afoot?"

"Seems to me we'd have a better chance to locate him than when we're rushing all around the country, being chased by squads of rebels

and brigands and regulars in turn, until we don't know which way to turn."

When they had managed to make a meal the chums made themselves as comfortable as conditions allowed. They kept their heads fairly close together, so they could talk as the humor seized them, and in this way some time passed.

"Strikes me that we haven't heard a single shout ever since that crowd went past here," Bob remarked, as though the thought had just occurred to him, "and I'm hoping they've cleared out, bag and baggage."

"I'm afraid that would be too good to be true," Frank told him, "and even now if you look up yonder you'll see that they haven't given up search for us!"

On hearing this, Bob turned and looked as directed. He saw several strange lights moving about high up on the side of the mountain. They were like will-o'-the-wisps of a gigantic size; but the boy knew only too well that they must be torches of lightwood in the hands of their enemies, who were starting to scour the valley.

CHAPTER XVII

CAUGHT!

"THEY don't seem to be heading this way; do they, Frank?"

"Not so you could notice it," was the reply, "but they may take a notion to push down this way later on. We'll have to lie low, if we don't want to be caught napping."

"And with only one rifle between us," groaned Bob, once more letting his thoughts revert to his loss.

"But each of us carries a gun at our belt, and that counts for something, you must remember," Frank reminded him.

They sat watching those queer lights moving this way and that. From two they grew to half a dozen. Sometimes they would meet, as though those who held the torches were conferring as to further plans. Then they would separate widely, so that quite a swath was covered.

"Makes you feel sort of nervous to be sitting here, watching those fireworks up there," Bob observed, "especially when you know that every

torch has several bandits back of it, and that they're hunting for you and me."

The zigzag course of the giant fireflies continued to interest them for some time longer. Then one by one they must have burned out; either that or else the bearers became discouraged by their lack of success. At any rate they dwindled away to three, then to two, and finally the last one disappeared.

Bob heaved a sigh of relief.

"I want to tell you that I'm feeling some better since that last light puffed out," he assured his comrade.

"It looks as though they might have given up hope of finding us so long as the darkness lasts," Frank assured him. "So we can sleep after all."

"Glad to hear you say that!" Bob declared.

Frank was examining the clear heavens, as though he meant to impress something that he saw there on his mind.

"We've got to be up and doing by morning," he told his chum, "and if it is necessary to abandon our pony, I'll shoulder the saddle for a time, though we've got others waiting for us, you remember."

It had been Frank's idea to have the led horses carry extra saddles as well as bridles, and the boys had reason to congratulate themselves

on this fact. Indeed, Bob had more than once declared it was the smartest thing he had ever known his chum to suggest. If they could only reach that little hiding place where Buckskin and Domino had been left, he would have a rifle to handle again, a fact that gave Bob considerable pleasure to remember.

"Things don't look as bright as they might; do they?" Bob remarked.

"But that isn't going to cut any figure in my finding dad, and trying to get him out of the hands of the bandits," Frank returned.

"A few setbacks won't cut us up much," Bob went on, "and in the end just think how fine it'll be to start for home with your father."

Frank sighed. Perhaps he was already beginning to realize that the task they had set themselves promised to be more difficult than either of them had fancied. It was one thing to plan the campaign, when safe at home on the ranch amidst friends and loyal employees; and quite another to execute it, down in a hostile country, with all manner of perils surrounding them.

If Frank felt misgivings assailing him, he was not the boy to let his chum know it. That was one reason he spoke so confidently, meaning to buoy up Bob's spirits by words of cheer, and possibly help himself at the same time.

After a while both found themselves getting drowsy. It did not seem the wisest thing for both to take a nap at the same time, because there was more or less danger, but Frank had arranged all that in his mind.

"I'm such a light sleeper, you know, Bob," he explained, "that I'd be apt to wake up if a cat tried to steal across a room while I was in bed. Besides, that cow pony has been partly trained to strike the ground with his hoof if he scents any stranger around. We'll have to take the risk, because both of us must have a chance to rest."

So they made themselves as comfortable as possible. The lack of a blanket was not so great a deprivation to these prairie boys as it would have proven to many another who found himself forced to sleep in the open, with the star-decked heavens for his only covering.

Frank proved that he was a light sleeper by rousing several times, and sitting up to listen, in order to satisfy himself that no danger hovered near.

He heard the pony cropping the grass again. Yes, and from a little distance came a faint tinkling murmur which Frank now knew must proceed from a gurgling stream, the sound having escaped their observation earlier in the night, when the crickets were noisier.

"I'll just locate that brook," he told himself, with evident satisfaction, "and in the morning we'll all be able to drink our fill. If it wasn't that I might not be able to get back here again in the darkness I'd be tempted to make a bee-line for it right now, I'm that thirsty. But that would be taking too much risk. I guess I can wait."

Nothing else had come to his hearing, and so Frank concluded that he need not remain awake any longer. Like most boys who have been brought up on a ranch, he was able to tell the time by the stars. One look aloft when there were no clouds to interfere was enough to tell him about what the hour must be. Clocks and watches do not enter into the list of necessities, as the riders of the cattle range know them.

Noting that it was somewhere in the neighborhood of two o'clock, Frank felt that he might rest for at least three more hours. If they were up and moving just before dawn it would be all right, according to his plans.

Bob, filled with confidence, and relying wholly on the ability of his chum to ward off any peril that might threaten, did not bother about rousing or lifting his head as the night progressed.

The first thing he knew he felt himself being violently shaken; and at the same time the muffled voice of Frank sounded in his ear saying:

"Wake up, Bob! I'm afraid they've got us hemmed in on all sides!"

Of course that caused Bob to open his eyes, and stare up at his chum, whom he found bending over him. Frank had a finger raised, as though he meant to impress the need of silence upon the other, and consequently Bob held back the exclamation that was on the tip of his tongue.

The dawn was at hand, and already it was possible to see for some little distance around. One of the first things Bob noted was the pony. He stood in plain view, again greedily cropping the sweet grass, of which he seemingly could not get enough.

If they could see him so plainly, what was to prevent other eyes from also noting his presence there? That circumstance must certainly betray them to the enemy.

When Frank said that he believed their foes were all around them, Bob knew it was not a guess; Frank must have seen or heard something ominous.

There was almost nothing to be done, because they had no camp stuff along. Bob wriggled to his knees, and tried to look around him, hoping that for once at least Frank might have made a mistake.

He himself saw no sign of the enemy. Once or twice he fancied he had discovered suspicious

figures standing erect and grim, as though sentries posted to prevent the flight of the adventurous boys, but on looking closer these in every instance resolved into the slender trunks of trees.

"I don't see anything!" whispered Bob, after he had completed the circuit.

"All the same they're over to the right, to the left, and behind us. I heard them exchanging signal whistles, though they let up on that when I woke you," Frank informed him.

"Then the fat is in the fire, because they must have seen the pony out there, and can guess we're not far away."

"I only wish we were!" grunted Frank, "three miles away, and headed for that same *cache* where we hid our other mounts. But I'm afraid it's too late now, though I'm of a good mind to try it."

"Why don't we, then?" Bob asked. "No matter how it turns out, we can't be much worse off than we are now; can we?"

"I guess not, so let's start. Have you got your gun handy, Bob?"

"Well, I should say I had, and I'm in a humor to use it, too, if they push us too hard. Go on, and I'll keep close at your heels."

Of course this flight meant that they must abandon their second pony, with the saddle and bridle. Bob was smart enough to pick up the

small amount of food that had been left, and cram it into his pockets, looking forward to a possible need at some future date.

It looked as though the saddle boys had now reached what Frank would have called "hard pan," in that all they possessed consisted of clothes, two revolvers, and a rifle.

Making use of his knowledge of woodcraft, the prairie boy led the way from the scene of their night's encampment. He meant to take advantage of every bush, rock and tree that could be made to serve his purpose. Frank believed that numerous keen eyes must be on the lookout, and that if they hoped to escape observation his tactics must rival those of the Indian, who can glide along with the silence of the snake.

Every little while Frank came to a brief halt. He not only wanted to take an observation, so as to try to ascertain whether they were being followed or not; but at the same time it was of considerable importance that he should pick out the best ground affording objects that could be used to screen their movements.

For a short time nothing happened. Bob even began to pluck up new courage, and was filled with hope that they might creep out between the lines of their watching foes.

If this could be done, it would not be so diffi-

cult to trail back to where they had left their favorite ponies, and once more feel that they were in condition to continue the hunt for the bandit headquarters.

The light was growing stronger all the while. This Bob was sorry to see, because it added to their troubles. Could they have been blessed with a brief interval of darkness, he believed it would be easy to slip away; but the conditions were favoring their enemies instead.

Bob was becoming more and more satisfied that they were to make a successful getaway, when he heard a mocking laugh somewhere close by. This was accompanied by some words in Spanish, and more laughter.

He knew the sounds came from above, and as he raised his head, to cast a look up toward the brow of a little cliff that stood nearby, what he saw filled him with apprehension.

CHAPTER XVIII

AT THE HORSES' HEELS

BOB could not say a word. In fact, except that he made a queer gasping noise, as though choking, one would never have known that he was alive. He afterwards admitted that he was almost petrified with astonishment when he saw a row of dark faces come into view.

There was no use trying to run, because several guns bore ominously on the two boys; and while the Mexicans are notoriously bad marksmen, it hardly seemed possible that they could make a miss at that short distance.

One of the men called out something in a stern voice. It was like so much Greek to Bob, who had not made himself a Spanish scholar during the time he had spent in the Southwest.

"I suppose he's ordering us to surrender," the Kentucky boy said, dense gloom written on his face.

"Yes, he has told us in his politest Spanish that unless we hurry and raise our hands as high as we can get them, he'll give the order for his men to shoot," Frank replied.

"Well, what are we going to do about it? You're the doctor."

From the tone in which Bob spoke it would seem as though he stood ready to follow the lead of his chum, no matter what Frank decided. If it was surrender, then Bob would put his hands up and be good; on the other hand, did Frank think it advisable to take chances and run for it, he was willing to do his best to sprint out of the danger zone, no matter how the lead flew.

"There's nothing for us to do but give in," Frank told him, "though I feel just as mean as you do about it. So let's elevate, and save their ammunition for them, not to mention a few punctures on our own account."

They proceeded to carry out the programme, though Bob continued to show his displeasure.

"First time I've ever been held up, and I don't like it a little bit," he announced, dejectedly. "For two cents I'd say let's make a break, you to run one way while I jumped the other. I don't believe they could hit a barn!"

"We'd be foolish to take the chances," he was told. "Keep holding up your hands the best way you know how, Bob. No need to make them mad, because it'd only mean a lot of knocking around for us, kicking and the like, if half I've heard about these chaps is true."

Bob groaned. The very thought of having to

suffer indignities at the hands of these hard looking customers made him fairly sick. Later on he was forced to admit that Frank's way was best. It gave them something to look forward to, whereas if they had been crippled by shots fired after them they would not be in a position to attempt anything.

"Are they coming down soon, or will we have to keep on waving our hands like this till we're paralyzed?" demanded Bob, presently.

"Oh! they'll drop in on us right away, never fear," he was assured. "Four men still have us covered with their guns; all the rest have disappeared, and I reckon they're hurrying around by some path they know about."

"I only hope the agony'll be over soon," commented Bob. "I feel like a fool standing around like this."

"Well, take my word for it you're not the only one who's found it unpleasant; there have been lots of others!" Frank assured him. "But there they come now!"

Half a dozen figures could be seen approaching.

"If that bunch up there'd only skip out right now, we might be able to spring a surprise on these other chaps," suggested Bob.

"No danger of that," Frank warned him. "They know a thing or two about clamping the

screws tight when they've got the lid on. Don't you think of making any such break. That end fellow is wild for an excuse to use his gun. Hold your hands up higher all the while. It's nearly over now."

"All but the shouting, I reckon!" groaned Bob.

The half-dozen men were coming on the run, and a wild looking lot they appeared to be. While both boys were used to seeing Mexicans around the stores in Arizona towns, they could not remember ever having set eyes on a more dilapidated yet picturesque looking lot of men than those by whom they were speedily surrounded.

The first thing the leading man did was to snatch the repeating rifle from Frank, who, of course, could not make any objection.

Not to be entirely left out in the distribution of spoils the rest pounced on the two American boys. Their revolvers were quickly taken, and nimble fingers turned their pockets inside out. They soon found themselves dispossessed of everything they had on their persons, small nickel watches, hunting knives, match-safes, and even a small compass that Frank valued very highly.

"Cleaned out, sure enough!" Bob exclaimed, as he saw the last article disappear. "I don't believe they've left me so much as a match."

"Well," Frank told him, stoically, "we ought to thank our lucky stars they left us our clothes and hats."

"But this fellow isn't Pasquel; is he?" Bob demanded, as he stared at the leader of the bandits, who was of medium height, though sinewy and strong, and whose snappy black eyes glittered constantly with either satisfaction, greed or anger, as the case might be.

"No, but I reckon we'll find that he's one of the bandit's lieutenants, ready to carry out the wishes of the chief. I'll speak to him, and ask what all this means. It may be worth something to us to seem indignant at our being held up; and so far as I see no harm can come of it."

He turned on the leader, and possibly to the surprise of that worthy spoke to him in Spanish. The man replied, though his tone was surly, and he allowed a frown to rest on his dark brow.

After a rapid-fire talk Frank once more turned to Bob, who had been trying to translate what was being said, by watching all gestures. People who speak Spanish and Italian do a considerable part of their talking with their eyes and features as well as shoulders and hands, so that it is often possible to get the gist of what is being said by paying attention.

"He says he is acting on the orders of his chief, who is determined on capturing us; first,

because we gave him and several of his crowd a scare yesterday; second, because we are gringos, and he hates the breed to the last man. Last, but far from least, he believes we have some connection with one of his prisoners, who is also an Americano."

"Meaning your father, of course, Frank?"

"There can be little doubt about that," assented the other.

Waiting only until the other detachment had come down from their elevated position and joined forces, the bandits ordered Frank and Bob to accompany them. Though he might be able to make a guess as to what was required if he had simply listened to the Spanish words spoken, when he saw the eloquent gestures that were made, Bob had no difficulty in translating the command.

"Looks like we might see the inside of Pasquel's camp before we expected to," Bob remarked, with a trace of bitterness in his voice.

The other captive did not reply, but that arose not so much from a feeling of despondency as that he was thinking deeply, trying to find some gleam of hope.

The men formed a ring around them, as though there was any likelihood of either boy venturing to run for it, when every one of their captors was armed.

Later on more recruits joined the squad until almost a score marched with the prisoners. Some seemed to take delight in making faces at the boys, following these with suggestive motions calculated to strike terror to their hearts. They were all of a nature to admit of but one interpretation—that their ultimate execution was very likely to be the common one of being stood up against a wall, before a firing squad.

“Don’t mind what they say or do,” warned Frank, when he noticed his chum draw back and shudder at the realistic way in which one of these ruffians depicted how they would be sent to execution. “It’s part of the education of these people, nearly all of them with Indian blood in their veins, to love to torture those they look on as enemies. Grin and bear it. If you show you’re scared that is just what they want. Laugh at them, look independent, snap your fingers, or whistle. They’ll understand by that you scorn them. And leave the rest to me.”

The boys were not allowed to mount a horse, even though their own pack animal had been secured, and was led by one of the band, being looked upon as common property among the brigands. A rope was fastened around each boy, under the arms. In this way they were led along. Bob was plainly ill at ease, and the reason for his unrest soon made itself manifest.

"What if they take a notion to run their ponies, Frank?" he asked.

"We'll have to do considerable sprinting in that case, to avoid being thrown down and dragged," came the answer. "Luckily, both of us happen to be pretty good runners, so let's hope there won't be anything unpleasant."

"Well, I've seen pictures where prisoners were made to trot along at the heels of the horses," Bob went on, "but I never thought I'd be doing that sort of a stunt myself. I only hope we get to their camp before we hit any level ground, or a down-grade. I'm not feeling much like running just now, with a stiff knee, after my tumble of yesterday."

Whenever he could find a chance to exchange a few words with one of their Mexican captors Frank took advantage of the opportunity. He failed to get much satisfaction, for the men were suspicious of him, as they would be of any American speaking Spanish.

He did manage, however, to learn that they expected to reach Pasquel's camp by noon, and also that the smoke signals which had attracted the attention of Bob as they went along, were being sent up in order to notify those who were at the gathering place that they were bringing prisoners back.

"That last guard let me understand," Frank

told Bob, "that the great Pasquel, who claims to be a rebel rather than a brigand, would be pleased to see us. It seems he has a crow to pick with two young Americanos who dared to fire close to his ears at the time he was dealing out justice to a family that he believed was giving news of his doings to the federal soldiers. And that means us, Bob."

"For one I'm not hankering after meeting this same Pasquel—not on his terms," Bob declared, with vehemence. "If I could run across him alone on the public road it wouldn't be so bad, because then I'd have a fair chance to get a bead on him before he could draw a weapon. But, Frank, all this makes me feel that we must do our level best to get away if half a chance comes."

"I agree with all you say, Bob," replied Frank, earnestly, "because unless we do escape we never can be of any assistance to dad; and it was to rescue him we made this long journey. So we'll both keep on the alert as we go along!"

CHAPTER XIX

"WATCH FRANCISCO!"

AS THE morning wore away they began to note signs that led them to believe they must be approaching the headquarters of the brigands. A constantly rising pillar of black smoke on a wooded elevation, toward which the column seemed to be heading, added strength to this surmise.

"Of course," Bob observed, for they were allowed to trail along in company, and could exchange remarks occasionally, "I don't think we're going to meet with a very friendly reception at the hands of that same Pasquel; but all the same I'll be glad to reach the end of the trail, for I'm some tired."

Frank was pleased to see his chum take things so coolly. The situation was desperate enough to call for every atom of courage they could summon. Only by constant watchfulness and readiness to take advantage of any avenue of escape that offered could they hope to extricate themselves from their predicament.

A short time afterwards they found them-

selves being led into what was probably the headquarters of the brigands who had been proving such a terror throughout Sonora, as well as parts of Chihuahua.

"One thing sure," Bob remarked, just before they entered the camp, "they've been smart enough to pick out a bully place to stay. No Mexican rural guard could ever force those passages we've been coming through. And if some of the federal army were sent against Pasquel, a man with a pair of field glasses could give warning of their coming while they were hours away."

"Yes," Frank answered, "this shows what a clever soldier Pasquel is. You know he's claiming to be hand in glove with the rebels right now, though from all we've heard Don Gonzales, as the governor of the State, refuses to recognize him as a revolutionist, and is said to be organizing an expedition to corner him."

"Well," Bob sighed, "it would be the finest thing going if that expedition could only show up while we're here. I think I could enjoy seeing wolf eat wolf; and while they were getting a strangle hold on each other you'd see a little batch of American citizens striking out for the border as fast as they could make it. That would be your father and the saddle boys."

"I only hope it turns out that way, Bob," Frank replied, "but we'd better keep bottled up from now on. Some of these greasers may be able to understand United States lingo, and get us into a peck of trouble. After this, when we've got anything to say, let's not say it aloud, but whisper it."

"I'm on, Frank, and I think you're barking up the right tree when you say that. But I'm beginning to wonder what this gay old bandit will do to us because of the way we chased him. That little rumpus must have riled him considerably, and jarred his pride. It was bad enough to be run off by gringos, but to have them a couple of boys made it ten times worse."

Frank was feeling anxious. He had heard so much about the unlimited power which Pasquel exercised among those who fought under his flag that he could not face the immediate future without uneasiness.

"Frank, look around and tell me if this doesn't seem like a regular fort," Bob remarked, a minute later, when they were entering the place. "Behind these rocks men could hold out against ten times their number. And look there, would you, they have dragged a couple of quick-firing guns up the hill! I should be sorry for the governor of Sonora if ever he tries to rush this

stronghold; they could mow the soldiers down like grain."

From the look of things the bandits had been long in this chosen stronghold. Huts had been erected, and there were many indications of permanency. All manner of spoils lay under shelter, proving that the raiders had been kept busy of late preying on outlying towns, railroad trains, and rich ranches.

Several dozen men had gathered to witness the arrival of the prisoners. The boys tried to put up a brave front, but it was not easy to do when from every side they met with jeers, ugly looks, and even blows from hands only too ready to inflict pain.

Their guards shielded them to some extent, not because they felt any degree of sympathy for the "gringos," but for other reasons more selfish. They fancied they had made a capture that would be certain to please their commander, and hence he was sure to reward them for it.

Surrounded by a jabbering crowd, the boys were taken to the center of the fortress. Frank had already made good use of his eyes, but if he had hoped to get a glimpse of his father he met with disappointment, for there was no sign of a white man in the midst of the dark-skinned and frowning natives.

It was true that in one section of the camp,

that had a military atmosphere, he discovered a little group that seemed to be guarded by two men carrying guns as though they might be prisoners; but every one of them seemed to be of Mexican blood. Frank guessed that these parties must be those merchants who had been taken from the stalled train at the time his father fell into the hands of the bandit chief.

"Oh! Frank!" Bob suddenly whispered, as though something had caught his eye of a nature to excite him considerably.

"What is it, Bob?" asked the other prisoner.

"Take a look over there, and tell me if you haven't seen that wiry, black-faced chap with the gay *serape* thrown over his left shoulder, and smoking a cigarette while he watches us."

Hardly had Frank done as his chum requested than he, too, drew a deep breath.

"Yes, I never forget a face; I remember that man!" he said, positively.

"The leader of the three Mexican cowboys we met on our way home after my pony had taken that loco weed dance, and had to be shot; am I right?"

"No other, and the man we afterwards heard called Francisco by the fellow we caught," Frank continued, still watching the other out of the tail of his eye.

"He was the man who stole the packet your

father seemed to set so much value on, and for which old Don Pablo was willing to pay so big a price. Frank, what can he be doing here, when he's really in the employ of the governor?"

"I don't know," replied his chum, in a puzzled tone. "It may be he's acting the part of a spy; but I'd rather believe that on his way down, after escaping from the Circle Ranch boys, he ran afoul of Pasquel, and had to pretend to join the brigands, to save his neck."

"I wonder, now, if that could be so," Bob continued, "because, if it is, don't you see, the slippery rascal may be only waiting for a good chance to take French leave. He's carrying that packet wanted by Don Pablo, you know, and which will net him a royal sum if it's delivered."

"I wouldn't be at all surprised but what you're on the right track. If the chance happened to come to us I'd like to interview Senor Francisco, and relieve him of his charge. It would be a fine thing if we could kill two birds with one stone that way."

"But here's 'General' Pasquel, as he is beginning to be called by his men," Bob went on, with a slight tremor in his voice.

The man who approached them was undoubtedly the same individual who had turned in his saddle and sent back such dire threats as he galloped away, at the time the boys interrupted the torture of the old couple.

He was smoking the usual cigarette, and there was a vindictive look on his swarthy face as he surveyed the prisoners. Somewhat to the surprise of the boys, when he spoke it was in very good English.

"So you have come to pay me a visit so soon; have you? Perhaps you did not know it was the great General Pasquel you annoyed yesterday, when he was enjoying himself in punishing a traitor? But of that we will speak more later. Why have you come down across the border into Sonora? My country is not at war with yours, yet you come with arms in your hands. There is a reason which you must tell."

To the surprise of Bob, Frank was ready with an answer.

"So you are the famous General Pasquel of whom we have heard so much?" the boy said, artfully feeding the very evident pride of the brigand. "You are right when you say we have come down here for something. A short time ago there was a robbery at our ranch, and something was taken which we valued highly. It is partly in the hope of recovering this that we are now in Mexico."

At that the brigand chief laughed aloud.

"A fool's errand, let me tell you, *amigo!*" he exclaimed. "No Mexican who would have the nerve to cross the boundary and snap his fingers in the face of your gringo crowd, would let two

half-grown boys take his plunder away from him. We are not made of salt down here, you should understand."

"But, *Señor*," Frank went on, quickly, carrying out the plan he had formed, "it was not any of your followers who made this raid, but men paid by Don Pablo Gonzales, your worst enemy, and who hates my father bitterly!"

The brigand chief started and looked closely in Frank's face, as though trying to decide whether he could believe this statement. Evidently it began to make him see things in a different light.

"Say you so?" he presently remarked. "This is news to me, young *Señor*. It may be I can coax you to tell me more later on, when I feel in the humor to talk. Take them away, and harm them not; but, Felipe, be ready to produce the prisoners when I send the word, or your ears may pay the penalty."

He turned and strode away, as though something else engaged his attention just then. There was an air of preparation apparent, Frank thought. This might indicate that news had been received of an expected attack from either the government forces, or the rebels who objected to the notorious Pasquel claiming to be of their class, and covering his robberies with the mantle of patriotism.

The two boys were hustled over to where the half-dozen Mexicans of the better class huddled together, watching all that was going on with eager eyes.

"Watch Francisco, Bob!" Frank whispered in his chum's ear, as they sank down to rest.

"I don't understand what you mean."

"I spoke to Pasquel loud enough for Francisco to hear, and I could see that he was listening to every word," Frank continued. "It told him there was danger of our betraying him. In that case he would be searched, and the packet taken away from him."

"Yes, Frank. Already Francisco seems to be nervous. He's looking around him, as though wondering if he might slip away."

"It isn't so much that Francisco wants to *escape* just now," pursued Frank. "What he's thinking about more than anything else is to find some hiding place close by the camp for that little packet. That's why I say watch him, and perhaps we may get a clue that will be worth something to us later on."

"There he goes, Frank, just as you said," Bob muttered, excitedly. "Now let's keep close watch, and see what he does."

CHAPTER XX

PASQUEL'S MOUNTAIN FORTRESS

"DID you see him do that, Frank?" gasped Bob, who was straining his eyes in order to note everything done by Francisco.

"Yes, he made a quick movement with his arm," replied Frank. "I didn't see the packet, but he certainly dropped something into the cleft of rocks over there, and I reckon we know what it was. Mark the place well, Bob; we may find a chance to pay it a visit sooner or later. At the worst we could tell Pasquel what we saw. I'd rather it fell into his hands than that the old don should get hold of it after all."

"I've marked it down, Frank, and could find it blindfolded, I think. But I hope they won't starve us. I'm as hungry as a wolf right now, and whatever is cooking in that big pot, it's got the right kind of smell for a half-starved cowboy."

"There, you see," Frank went on to add, paying no attention to his chum's complaint, "Francisco looks pleased, for he's loitering around with

a grin on his face. If he's searched later, they would have their trouble for their pains, he thinks."

"Yes, he's patting himself on the back right now, and thinking what a smart fellow he is," Bob admitted.

Bob's fears proved groundless after all, so far as the brigands intending to starve their prisoners was concerned. When the meal was served they received their share of the contents of the big pot, that had been one of several bubbling and boiling for a long time past.

Mexican cooking was new to Bob, though Frank may have tested it in the past. Ordinarily the Kentucky boy might not have particularly fancied the highly seasoned food offered to him; but beggars have no right to be choosers, and just then he was too hungry to complain.

"Quantity more than quality is my motto while I'm a prisoner," he told his chum. "But I wonder what one of our old colored mammies at home would say if she had this mess put before her? Whew! my tongue feels as if it had been too close to the fire. I believe there was red pepper in that dish!"

"Plenty of it, because no Mexican would think of eating a stew that wasn't fired up that way," the ranch boy told him. He had seen cowboys from across the border fetch home strings of the

little red peppers with which to give an appetizing flavor to their food.

For some time after that the camp lay in a sort of dormant state, with many of the brigands sleeping. The Mexican after eating is fond of lying down, and taking what he calls a *siesta*. The cigarette he is smoking will gradually slip from his fingers; and presently he is far in the land of dreams.

As both boys were in need of sleep themselves, and the afternoon proved rather warm, after the breeze died out, they, too, allowed themselves to drop off. In this manner time slipped away, until Bob, chancing to look up at the sky, noted that the sun was well on its journey toward the western horizon.

Signs of life then began to be noticeable. Men sat up, yawned, stretched, and of course lighted fresh cigarettes, which they seemed to be quite adept at rolling with their nimble, yellow-tipped fingers and thumbs.

Frank was beginning to feel worried about not having seen any sign of his father. He tried to crush the fears that were gripping his heart.

It would seem that Bob's thoughts must be traveling in the same direction, for just then he spoke.

"It's queer we haven't seen anything of your father around here," he said. "I was thinking

it might pay to ask Pasquel about him the next chance you get."

"He's bound to know the truth sooner or later, that's sure," Frank remarked, in a thoughtful way, as though he had been weighing the suggestion in the balance.

"We can't do anything until we know if he is here, and where they are keeping him," Bob continued.

"I think I had one little clue a while ago," Frank announced, "and I'll tell you what it was. While we were eating our dinner I saw a man fill a bowl of the mess, and go off with it. When he slipped into camp half an hour later he brought back the bowl, but it was empty."

"Good for you, Frank!" exclaimed the Kentucky lad, with considerable animation. "Chances are you've hit the bullseye with that guess. To whom would he be taking the grub but to some special prisoner?"

"You know," Frank went on, "that by putting things we heard together, we've understood that Pasquel believes dad is a gringo millionaire; and that if he handles him the right way he ought to produce a big pile of Yankee money on condition of being set free."

"Yes," Bob added, carrying out the idea, "and that's why he isn't kept along with that bunch of Mexican merchants over there. They

can only pay small sums at the best. But how are we going to find out where Pasquel's got him hidden away?"

"I watched that man as far as I could," Frank announced, "and when I saw him turn and pass into a crevice in the rock over near the tree that grows out of the face of the cliff, and turns up in bow shape, I made up my mind there was some prisoner kept there. And I've figured it out that it must be dad!"

Bob looked earnestly in the direction indicated, so much so that Frank thought it best to warn him.

"Don't stare so hard, Bob," he whispered, "or you might make them suspicious. If that sharp-eyed Pasquel happened to be watching us he'd guess something. I'll tell you what I think we might do now, to help pass the time away."

"I wish you would, then!" Bob declared, "because I'd like to learn something worth while. Things look kind of gloomy to me. What is it?"

"Let's work our way over by degrees, so we can pass the time of day with those Mexican *señors* who are looking so downcast as they smoke and jabber among themselves. Perhaps they may know what was done with father."

Of course Bob was only too willing to make the attempt. Anything suggested by his chum met with his unqualified approval, and in this in-

stance he readily saw where they might profit by the plan.

They were being watched by two men, who always kept their guns in their hands. These fellows probably did not have orders to treat the two boys harshly. It turned out that they really made no threatening gesture, nor did they command them to sit down again when Frank and Bob arose. So the boys stretched their arms, and in a careless way sauntered over toward where the other prisoners were taking it easy, sitting cross-legged on the ground, talking in low tones, and consuming great quantities of rank tobacco rolled in cigarettes.

His lack of education in the Spanish language prevented Bob from participating in the conversation that followed. Still he used his ears and eyes, and believed he could tell now and then what Frank and the others were talking about.

At first it concerned the attack on the train, and their capture. By asking several shrewd questions Frank learned that there had been an American rancher in their company at the time they arrived in the camp of the bandits.

The ranch boy was too wise to appear very much interested; and it was only in a casual way that one of the Mexican prisoners later simply nodded toward the fissure that could be seen under the singular tree growing out of the cliff.

"He's told Frank where they've got his father," Bob told himself, when he saw this nod.

Shortly afterwards Frank, after expressing the hope that the merchants might be able to make satisfactory arrangements looking to their release, sauntered away from the spot.

"You got what you wanted; didn't you, Frank?" Bob asked him.

"Try to seem a whole lot less anxious, Bob," was the reply. "You ought to keep a better grip on your feelings. Yes, it's just as we thought."

"Your dad is being kept in some sort of cave over there; is he? And Frank, how did you manage to get all that news without giving yourself away?"

"Oh! I simply asked if Pasquel had shown any bitterness toward Americans as a rule, because that would affect us, you see, and one of the Mexicans took the trouble to assure me he didn't think so; also that what Pasquel had in his mind most of all was a big ransom. I needn't be afraid that he had injured the American who had been taken along with them, for he was being held a prisoner, and was considered such a valuable prize that the bandits kept him by himself in some place over by that tree."

"Well, that's something gained, Frank," Bob declared, triumphantly.

"Yes," Frank continued, "and it means a whole lot, for if we get a chance to break away we'll know where to look for dad. He's been a prisoner a whole week and more now, perhaps nearer two. I wonder how he looks. I'm worried for fear he may have been hurt at the time he was taken from the train."

"Did they say there was any fighting?" asked the other.

"From what they let fall," Frank explained, "I gathered that dad was the only one on the train who tried to resist. He shot two of the bandits, wounding them, and was then jumped on by a dozen men. I'm sure he must have been badly bruised; but I hope there's nothing serious the matter with him."

"That would be too bad," muttered Bob.

"He was able to ride a horse up here, I understood," Frank continued, "and that looks encouraging. Let's believe he's tied up in that cranny, and that if only we find a chance to get free ourselves, we can help him get away."

The afternoon faded, and evening came on. Again a meal was cooked, and as before the prisoners received their share of the supper.

This time Bob was on the alert, and he, too, saw one of the guards walk away with a platter of food; also noting the fact that he vanished in

what seemed to be a cleft in the wall of the cliff.

"That proves one thing," he told his comrade, with a sigh of relief.

"We'll consider it settled, then, that the one we came to find is close by," Frank remarked, trying to steady his trembling voice. "I'd give a lot to be able to let him know we're here; but then, so long as we're prisoners the same as himself, that would only add to his troubles."

"With that off our minds, Frank, we can settle down to hatching up some sort of scheme that will give us our freedom. And let me tell you, the quicker we begin to lay plans the better I'll be pleased."

"Oh! I arranged all that some time ago," Frank answered. "In fact, before we had fallen into the hands of the enemy I'd discounted such a thing, and prepared to figure out a plan. Tonight must see us all out of this camp, because to-morrow may be too late."

"Yes," Bob returned, "and it looks to me as if something that wasn't down on your bill might be going to happen. Do you see that man on a winded horse who's just come in? He looks like a messenger bearing important tidings for the chief, who's hurrying to meet him. There's something doing!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE SIGNAL IN THE SKY

It chanced that when the newcomer met the bandit leader they were not far away from where the two boys sat. Frank strained his hearing in the hope of catching what was said.

Once more did Bob find himself compelled to depend on his chum in order to gather what it all meant. As he sat close to Frank he kept nudging the other impatiently, so over his shoulder Frank kept muttering short sentences to give Bob a condensed version of the state of affairs.

"He's bringing alarming news," Frank went on to say, lowering his voice. "The governor of Sonora, General Gonzales, or as we know him, Don Pablo, is on the road here, looking for Pasquel, whom he has sworn to capture. That isn't all, either. It seems there's a big force of rebels heading this way, too, and that they've got us surrounded. The messenger says there's been some treachery, and that the secret of their retreat has been given to the leader of the rebels!"

"Whew! that looks as though there'd be warm doings around here pretty soon!" gasped Bob. "And chances are it's going to drag us into the row in the bargain. P'raps they'll try to make us fight on their side against the rebels. I hope it won't come to that, because I'd be ashamed to have my people at home hear that Bob Archer had been shot by a file of soldiers for assisting a Mexican bandit."

"We must try and take advantage of all the confusion that's going to break out here, and find a chance to make our getaway," Frank told him.

"Just look at Pasquel, Frank! Now you can see what sort of a tiger he is. No wonder they've never been able to get him down. He's sure in his element when there's a fight coming along."

It was something worth while to see the transformation that had taken place in the leader of the brigands. He seemed to throw off his languid air as one might a worn-out glove. His dark face glowed with excitement, and a fierce joy. His nature was never so well satisfied as when burnt powder was in the air.

He hurried from point to point, and his men jumped to obey his orders. They, too, were no longer the lazy lot they had seemed a short time before. A knowledge that capture meant for them death before a file of soldiers was enough

to make them determine to fight to the last.

Everywhere was confusion, but no shouts. Men worked in silence, or if they had to exchange remarks they did so in muffled tones. Bob had never before looked upon such a thrilling sight as when he saw those desperate outlaws, whose hands had long been raised against those of all others, hurrying to place themselves in a condition to resist to the last gasp the anticipated invasion of their supposed invincible retreat.

Its secrets had been exposed to the rebel foe. Armed with a knowledge of what weak points there were connected with its approaches, these same rebels could no doubt manage to overwhelm the most stubborn defense.

"Do you think they mean to stay here and take their medicine, Frank?" Bob asked, when he found himself unable to decide what all these preparations signified.

"It's hard to tell," replied the other. "I'm of the opinion they will put up a bluff, and then try to steal away while the darkness lasts. If they're still hedged in by morning their goose is cooked."

"What effect is that going to have on our plans?" continued Bob.

"First of all," Frank informed him, "I'd like right well to find a chance to get hold of that packet because if we do clear out of this it'll

either be left behind, or else Francisco might be able to recover it, and leave us all in the lurch."

"It might be done while there's so much confusion," Bob suggested. "And say, have you noticed Francisco lately? I don't seem able to locate the fellow just now."

"Yes, I saw him go off with the bunch Pasquel sent out, heavily armed, which was intended to guard some passage that's threatened," Frank answered.

"Then see if you can work it," his chum begged. "While the cat's away, the mice will play. I hope they won't pull you up before you get to the crack into which you believed he slipped that sealed packet."

Frank lost no time in attempting to carry out his project. He trusted more or less to the fact that in the midst of so much excitement, no one in particular would pay attention to the fact that he was wandering about, so long as he made no move to leave the camp.

The fact that Bob stayed back had something to do with Frank's not being halted, for they did not think he would desert his companion.

Frank knew that one or two of those who had been detailed to guard the prisoners, perhaps the fellow especially ordered to keep the boys secure, might keep a watchful eye upon his movements. Accordingly he acted as though simply filled with

curiosity concerning the bustling scene going on all around him.

Bob watched, with more or less anxiety. He wondered how Frank would manage to carry out the little plan he had arranged.

"He's about over to where he said he saw Francisco bend down, and drop the packet in that crack," he told himself.

Just then Bob received a shock. Chancing to look beyond, possibly attracted by some moving figure, he saw a man bending partly over, and making straight for the spot where Frank had halted. The fires were burning briskly, and as the light fell full upon his face Bob recognized Francisco!

"Oh! what hard luck to have him bob up just when we hoped he was a long way off!" Bob groaned. "And by the way he acts, the chances are he's come back on some excuse, just to get hold of that package again. I wonder what he'll do if he sees Frank taking it out of the hole? And does Frank know Francisco is near?"

This last was a very important question, and Bob held his breath as he endeavored to learn the truth. Of course he could only do this by watching to see if his chum shot a glance in the quarter where the Mexican raider had appeared.

"It's all right," Bob told himself a few seconds later. "Frank knows he has come back.

Will he change his plans now, and let Francisco get the stolen packet? If he does, I'm greatly mistaken; I think I know Frank too well to believe he'd take water so easily."

Hardly had Bob muttered those last few words than he realized that his confidence in his chum was not misplaced. He saw Frank suddenly drop on his knees, as though he meant to secure one of his leggins that had worked loose. No one would suspect otherwise, unless, like Francisco and Bob, he knew there was another object in the simple act.

"I reckon he got it, all right!" Bob told himself a minute later, as he saw his comrade rise to his feet, and start briskly toward him.

Looking toward Francisco, Bob saw the Mexican standing, glaring after Frank. He made a movement as though half-tempted to hurry after the boy, to demand that he turn over the packet. That must on second thought have convinced the man that it was too dangerous, since if he made any sort of row the attention of Pasquel would be drawn, with the result that the valuable packet which Don Pablo meant to pay him a large sum for stealing would pass into the possession of one who was the well known foe of the governor.

No doubt Francisco determined that his best policy would be to lie low, and trust to a kind fortune to send him a chance to recover the

packet. So long as the bandit chief did not know of its existence, at least there was some hope that he could lay hands on it again.

When Frank rejoined his chum he was the same calm fellow as before. All the chuckling that was done came from the more excitable Bob.

"You managed that as fine as silk, Frank," he said, when they were together once more. "And you just ought to have seen how mad Francisco acted. I was ready to let out a yell if he started to do anything desperate. Once I even thought he might shoot; but then he must have remembered that Pasquel suspected him, and wouldn't stand for such work. You got the packet; didn't you, Frank?"

"It's safe inside my jacket," the other replied.

"I'd call it a good omen," declared Bob. "Now that we've had such good luck in the first round, let's hope it keeps up. If we could only get the colonel free, and slip past the sentries while the fighting was going on, what a bully thing it'd be!"

If Frank thought the same thing, he did not bother saying so. In fact, it was characteristic of the two chums that Bob delighted in doing the greater part of the talking, while Frank spent a considerable amount of his surplus energy in acting.

It appeared that presently Pasquel seemed to

have made all arrangements looking to the defense of the citadel where he had for so long a time kept his headquarters, and which the bandits had always believed to be impregnable.

But as frequently happens, treachery must have accomplished what valor could not have attained by the boldest attacks, and the swarming rebels would soon be chasing the bandits out of their rocky fortress.

Already distant shots announced that the action had begun. They welled up from along the side of the mountain, and were evidently being exchanged between the outposts of the rival forces.

If the rebels really knew some secret connected with Pasquel's stronghold, it seemed more than likely that they would engage the defenders warmly in the front while a strong force crept around to take advantage of the passages that, once known to the enemy, made the citadel untenable by the defenders.

As the volleying became faster, and the night air grew aflame with spiteful splashes of fire here, there and everywhere, Bob and Frank waited impatiently to learn what the policy of the bandit leader would be.

The fact that Pasquel did not go forth to lead his harassed force was plain evidence to Frank that he meant to desert the place pres-

ently. Knowing that its strength was gone, now that treachery had gotten in its work, the brigand chief was preparing to break through the lines of the enemy, and make his escape, with some of his band if possible, but alone if necessary.

"Why, he's got a skyrocket, Frank, and acts as though he meant to set it off!" Bob remarked, later on. There were only a dozen or so men in the camp, the rest having gone out on the firing line.

"It's going to mean a signal when that rocket curves up into the dark sky," was Frank's rejoinder.

"They can all see it, rebels as well as outlaws, and p'raps the federals in the bargain," Bob continued. "Of course, it's meant only for his men; and what do you figure it out he wants to tell them?"

As the rocket took its hissing way upwards, leaving a trail of sparks, Frank gave his opinion of its meaning as interpreted by Pasquel.

"I think he wants to let all his men know he's going to skip out, so they can save themselves."

CHAPTER XXII

ESCAPE AND PURSUIT

"I HOPE," said Bob, as the last spark died away, "if they are going to try and slip out from here they won't think to leave your father tied up, Frank."

"Not much danger of that," Frank replied. "See what they've started to do to the Mexican merchants over there. It looks as if they meant to throw them overboard as not worth while bothering with. And to make sure they don't call out, and bring the rebels on in a hurry, they mean to rope them all, and gag them in the bargain."

"Whee! that may come to us, too," Bob suggested. "P'raps it'd be our best plan to slip away and hide, if we get half a chance. I'd hate to be left here tied up like a mummy, while they skipped out with your father. Can't we do *something*?"

Frank looked around quickly. He evidently felt nerved to make just such a break for liberty if an opening occurred. Were all the men in the

camp so busily engaged just then that they could dodge behind some friendly rock? It meant everything to them, for a little slip might be fatal to their plans. They had come a long way, urged on by one desire to save Frank's father from the pitfall into which he had stumbled.

"Yes, I believe we might, and it's worth trying, Bob!" he answered. "Come, do as I do, and be careful—very careful!"

Both boys bent low, and started to move away. As Frank had said, the bandits seemed to be wholly intent on making their prisoners secure, so that they should not hasten events, and set the enemy on their trail sooner than would otherwise be the case. This prevented any of them from taking note of the fact that the two gringo boys were no longer on the spot they had occupied a few seconds before.

With all his nerves tense, and his eyes apparently trying to look three ways at once, so as to detect any threatening danger, Bob was making good progress when he came to a place where it was necessary to clamber up over a projecting rock that barred the way.

Frank had already succeeded in making good his climb, and Bob was in the act of following his example when a figure suddenly swung around the other end of the rock, and the boy found himself face to face with Pasquel himself.

On account of the fires burning not far away, it was light enough for each to recognize the other. Perhaps the bandit chief was as much surprised to see Bob as the boy was filled with consternation to discover Pasquel.

Before poor Bob could think of making a backward move he saw that the bandit was covering him with a gun, and involuntarily Bob raised his hands to show that he was helpless.

His one hope was that Frank might be able to help him in this dire extremity, although he dared not lift his eyes to see what had become of his chum, for fear that he might hasten the undoing of the other.

"Hola! what is this? You would run away, gringo boy, it seems? I have other plans for you and your friend, because I know you have come to Mexico to find the Americano rancher who will make me rich before he ever sees his home again. Where then is the other? Tell me, or it will be an evil night for you!"

Bob knew what this threat meant. The man was capable of doing almost any cruel thing, once his evil passions were aroused. Bob did not know what to do or say. He might pretend not to understand, so as to gain time; but there was always the danger that Pasquel, becoming impatient, might proceed to extreme measures.

If Frank would only *do* something, he could

not think what; but surely the chum who had always proven equal to every crisis should be able to master this one!

Even as these wild thoughts were flying like meteors through Bob's brain he heard a sound as though a stone had fallen, instantly followed by a groan. To his great joy he saw the bandit crumple up as though Frank had dropped some heavy weight down on him.

Immediately Frank himself came down the face of the incline in great haste. He bent over the fallen man, and Bob could see that he was feeling for something.

"What did you do to him, Frank?" asked the Kentucky boy, his voice tremulous with relief and joy.

"Only dropped a stone on his head," replied Frank. "It knocked him out for a little while, and while I have such a good chance to get something to defend ourselves with I thought I couldn't let it pass. Here, take this gun, Bob! Now we're helpless no longer."

"How you do change trouble into good fortune!" cried the admiring Bob. "Why, I feel able to turn around, and tackle all the rascals left in the camp. Couldn't we do something like that? Wouldn't they be apt to think the first thing that it must be the rebels had crept up sooner than they expected? And oh! Frank,

think how we could join forces with your father then!"

That possibility decided Frank. The possession of arms had made him look at matters from a new standpoint, too, so that he was quite willing to turn back and attack the camp.

Both boys were worked up to a high pitch of excitement. They felt that the success or failure of their enterprise depended on the events of the next few minutes, and that once having decided on their course of action they must not let anything stand in the way.

So they turned around, and retraced their steps. They had not come far away from the camp when the meeting with Pasquel occurred, so they did not have any very great distance to go.

When they drew near they saw that the half-dozen men had gathered together, having finished tying up the Mexican merchants. From their actions Frank judged they were only waiting for their leader to come back and give orders for them to get the prisoner of the crevice in the rocks and hasten away, in the hope of eluding the rebel forces that surrounded the mountain.

"Shoot over their heads, Bob!" whispered Frank, "and at the same time whoop it up for all you're worth. Try and make them believe we're greasers, you understand. Now, go it!"

With that both boys started to shouting at the top of their lungs, at the same time banging away with the weapons taken from Pasquel. The rifle was really the repeater that had been snatched from the hands of the boys at the time of their capture.

Of course it was only natural for the half-dozen alarmed brigands to believe the camp was being attacked by an overwhelming force of rebels. They vanished like smoke before the breeze, nor did Frank and Bob care in the least where they went, so long as they did not come back.

When convinced that the coast was clear, the boys ran straight to that spot where the tree grew out from the face of the cliff. Here, just as they had suspected, they found there was a crack in the wall wide enough to allow of their passage.

Frank had only stopped by one of the fires to snatch up a faggot that was ablaze, and swinging this around his head he began to call out as he went:

“Hello! Dad! Dad, are you here? We’ve come to get you out of this! Call and let’s know where you are?”

What sounded like a groan directed their attention to a place a little further on, and here they indeed found Colonel Haywood. He was

lying on some dried grass, bound, as well as gagged.

Frank hastened to release his father, whose arms speedily clasped him in a feeble embrace. If ever a man found himself delighted to see a face he loved, the owner of Circle Ranch was when he looked into the happy countenance of his boy, with Bob standing close by, sharing in the enthusiasm of the moment.

"But we must get away from here in a big hurry," Frank hastened to say, "for the rebels are coming, and just now they hate Americans almost as much as these bandits do. We'll try and explain things as we go, Dad. Are you able to walk, do you think?"

Although very stiff and sore, Colonel Haywood was able to move, and it was likely that he would improve with every passing minute, as his blood circulated better.

"The camp first!" exclaimed Frank. "Take hold of father's other arm, Bob, and give him a little help at the start. I'm hoping we'll be able to pick up a few odd guns that may have been scattered around. And then it'd be a shame to go without setting that bunch of Mexican merchants free. They may want to escape before the rebels come as much as we do."

Entering the camp they looked around, and as Frank had expected, managed to find several

weapons that had been abandoned in the hurry shown by the outlaws to get away. There were horses, too, but Frank knew better than to try to lead mounts down that rocky elevation in the gloom of night. Besides, the possession of animals would be sure to betray them to the gathering hosts of rebels and thus serve to encompass their downfall.

Frank, true to his word, cut the bonds of the alarmed merchants.

"The rebels are coming," he told them in Spanish, "and if you don't care to face them you had better clear out, or hide."

After having done what he considered to be his duty by the Mexican tradesmen, Frank saw no reason for further delay. Once again, then, he led the way along the trail he hoped would take them to safety down the mountain side.

When they came to the rock where the encounter with Pasquel had taken place, Bob called out in surprise:

"Why, he's gone, Frank—slipped away as neat as you please! I bet you he was playing 'possum with us, after all!"

"It doesn't matter to us," Frank told him. "I'm glad in one way I didn't snuff his wretched life out with that big stone. And I reckon he's hurried off to join the rest of his men somewhere below."

"Let's hope we won't see anything more of that bunch again," Bob remarked, as he brought up the rear of the little procession that trailed down the dark side of the mountain.

Progress was very slow at best; still they knew they were gradually drawing nearer to the base. Once this was reached, Frank meant to move off as fast as they could go in the exhausted condition of his father. Then they would hide, and rest the balance of the night. In the morning they could lay their plans according to the conditions surrounding them.

They could hear considerable firing of guns at different places, and presently judged that they must be between the lines of the opposing forces.

Frank exercised all his caution, and was able to avoid contact with any hostile force. When another hour had passed they seemed to be on safe ground. As the rancher was quite exhausted, after his suffering from several wounds received at the time of his capture, and the privations he had since endured, Frank concluded to halt and rest.

Distant firing still kept up at the time they lay down to get what sleep they could. From this they judged that some of the bandits had been unable to escape through the investing lines of the rebels, and were standing off the enemy with a desperation born of despair.

It was daylight when Frank awoke again. They had nothing to eat, and wished to get to the *cache* where the horses had been left, so it was decided to start without loss of time.

Although at first the rancher felt stiff and sore, after he warmed up a little he declared himself able to keep going for miles.

The country was exceedingly rough, and Frank cautioned Bob to keep on the lookout for signs of sudden danger. Of course he was also using his eyes to detect a threatening peril; but at the same time Frank indulged in hopes that he might glimpse a deer, or some other sort of game which, by means of the rifle he carried, he might bag.

Part of the morning passed in this way. Several times they heard distant shots back in the mountainous country from which they had recently escaped. From this fact Frank judged that the rebels had not yet entirely wiped out the bandits.

"We ought to get back to where we left our horses and extra stuff before night sets in; hadn't we, Frank?" Bob asked, in a low tone, when the attention of the rancher happened to be turned in another quarter.

"Yes, some time before," came the troubled reply, "unless dad gives out entirely."

"Are you afraid of that?" asked the other, taking alarm at once.

"Well, I'm hoping for the best," Frank replied, "but you must remember that he is no longer a young man. And no matter what his grit, he was pretty seriously wounded, and must have lost a lot of blood. That's what helps to keep him so weak, you see. But we'll do all we can to get there, and fight if we're stopped on the road."

"But what if your father drops, and can't go any further?" Bob continued.

"Then we'll make a stretcher from some of these saplings, and between us carry him the rest on the way," answered Frank.

A sudden cry from the colonel startled the boys. Looking toward him they found that he was pointing to the left, and showed signs of excitement. Hardly had Frank and Bob turned their eyes in that direction than they, too, uttered exclamations of alarm.

"The fat's in the fire!" cried Bob. "A squad of greasers are heading this way. If that isn't Pasquel at their head I'm mighty much mistaken. What a pity that rock wasn't a little heavier! Now we're going to hit up against all sorts of trouble again, because they're shouting like mad, and making for us. Don't you think we ought to back up somewhere, and let 'em know we're armed?"

"It's the only thing we can do," said Frank.

CHAPTER XXIII

GOOD-BYE TO THE SADDLE BOYS

GLANCING around, Frank discovered that if they could manage to push on for a few hundred yards they might find a chance to make a much better stand against the oncoming bandits.

"Do you think you can keep up for ten minutes more, Dad?" he asked, hastily. "Because we'll strike a rocky rise if you can, where we'll hold out against the wolves."

"And make it hot for them, too," added Bob, through his teeth.

"I'll do the best I can, boys," replied Colonel Haywood, who was looking unusually white for a man who had always been florid of face.

They pressed on. The score of Mexicans in the rear gained constantly. Now and then they would send shots after the three Americans, and it was not very pleasant to hear the bullets zip-zipping through the air all around them. At any minute one better aimed than the rest might do some damage.

Still Frank knew not what else to do, unless he

sank down and held the enemy at bay with his repeating rifle, covering the retreat of his companions.

He was seriously considering this plan when it turned out to be entirely unnecessary. Bob was the one who made the discovery this time.

"There's another lot of them hiding back of that chaparral, yonder!" he cried out, in more or less dismay. "But wait, what's this mean, Frank? As sure as you live they're dressed in white uniforms like soldiers. Yes, I do believe it must be that detachment of the federal troops we heard were looking for Pasquel and his men."

"Well, they've found them!" shouted Frank, wild with delight. "Look at the bandits swarming along, would you, Bob, never dreaming of the ambush they're running headlong into? There, the soldiers jump up now! See the sheet of flame that runs along their front! Why, half the bandits went down with that volley, and Pasquel among the lot. We're all right now, I reckon, Dad. The government troops will be friendly, I hope."

Standing there they watched the rest of the engagement. Although taken off their guard, and with half their number on the ground as the result of that first volley, the bandits scorned to run or surrender. No doubt they knew that it would be the same in either case, and they pre-

ferred having a chance to fight back, so they could die with weapons in their hands.

The affair was soon over. After all, some half-dozen wounded bandits did fall into the hands of the Government soldiers, and among them was the notorious Pasquel. It would appear that his doom was sealed; yet, strange to say, it turned out that the crafty rascal managed to make friends with some officer in whose charge he was placed, and in the end escaped to the mountains, where later he joined the rebels in the field, and became their best fighter.

Frank and the others waited to learn what the officer commanding the soldiers would do with the three Americans. Presently he came riding toward them, accompanied by several aides. They could see that he was a fine looking elderly man. Frank suspected it from the start, so he was not very much surprised when he heard his father say:

"This certainly is the irony of fate, that we should be saved from our enemies by none other than Don Pablo Gonzales!"

Of course the boys were deeply interested in the coming of the elderly man of whom they had heard so much. Colonel Haywood had never met the Mexican hidalgo, though he had seen pictures of him in the papers, for his rise to the governor's chair had been rapid and dramatic,

and stirring accounts of the event had been published far and wide.

They had conceived such a dislike for the wealthy old Mexican that both Frank and Bob were surprised when he made them a friendly salute, and in excellent English asked how it came that they were being pursued by brigands, and whether he could be of any assistance to the Americanos.

"It happens that I was taken a prisoner while traveling on a train which was attacked by the bandits," Colonel Haywood told the governor. "This brave lad is my son who, upon receiving a message from me, has risked his life to save me. And this other young chap is his friend, Robert Archer. Unless I am mistaken, *Señor*, we are indebted to General Gonzales, governor of Sonora?"

The Mexican nodded his head.

"I chance to occupy that position at present, *Señors*," he said, with a grim smile, "though in the disturbed conditions that prevail all through Mexico no one can say who may be the governor of Sonora to-morrow. But if I can loan you horses, or in any way prove my friendly feelings for your great country, command me."

Bob stared at Frank, and the other merely nodded his head. Evidently their views concerning the feeling Don Pablo held toward the United

States were all wrong. He had changed front during these years that had elapsed since he professed to hate all "gringos."

Colonel Haywood must have yielded to a sudden impulse, for as the two astonished boys listened they heard him say, with unusual feeling in his voice:

"General, would you mind alighting, and coming with me for a few minutes? I have something to say to you that may prove of the highest importance."

Although evidently surprised at the request, the commander of the Government troops immediately started to grant the rancher's wish. They were soon standing in a little clump, and just as Frank now expected, his father held out his hand toward him, saying:

"Let me have that which you secured in the bandit camp, son. I have concluded that I've done wrong in keeping it all these years, and that Don Pablo should be put in possession of what he esteems far above what it would be valued by any other living person. Here, then, *Señor*, I make you a voluntary present in return for the great favor you have done us this day, and the gentlemanly spirit which you displayed in offering to assist us further."

Frank immediately handed over the rather bulky packet, still sealed, as it had been while

reposing safely so many years in the desk of the rancher.

"Pardon me, *Señor*, but I do not understand!" exclaimed the surprised governor, as the package was placed in his outstretched hand.

"Listen," said Colonel Haywood, with one of his engaging smiles, "that is the packet you have desired to possess for so many years. I am Colonel Leonidas Haywood, with whom you have been in communication—brother to the young American who years ago loved your daughter, and carried her away.

"You know how we found them asleep in each other's arms on the scorching desert? That packet contains what you begged me to return to you long ago, but which I declared you should never possess, because I believed you ought to be punished the rest of your days. But now I can see, *Señor*, that grief and suffering have softened your heart. You have paid the price for your cruelty to your child, and I gladly hand you the last mementoes of her charming presence. May they stir your heart, and bring you renewed peace."

"But how do they come here, *Señor*?" asked the governor, half-dazed, as he stared at the packet in his hands, which he was already eagerly beginning to open.

"The man you sent," explained the rancher,

“Francisco, took them from my desk and came back to Mexico, when he fell in with Pasquel and was forced to take service with him. These boys were also taken prisoner, and managed to secure the packet. That is all, *Señor*.”

Another minute, and the packet lay open before them. It contained a few simple ornaments that may have had some value as gems, among them a high comb such as Mexican as well as Spanish ladies use to decorate their hair. But the principal article was a soft lace *rebosa*, that seemed to breathe of the sweet presence of the lovely girl who once wore it.

The boys saw the old governor bend down and passionately kiss these things many times; nor were they ashamed because the tears came into their own eyes at witnessing his emotion.

Of course after that Don Pablo would not be content without their accepting an escort out of the danger zone, where they were apt to meet either rebels or Government troops at any time. He also promised Frank that later on he would send him a copy of the picture he possessed of his daughter, just as she appeared when she fled from his roof with the American she loved.

It may be mentioned here that Don Pablo afterwards did keep that promise, and both boys often declare they could not blame Frank's uncle for falling in love with such a sweet creature.

The little party had no difficulty in crossing to the American side of the border and it can be well understood that the colonel's home-coming was a warm one indeed. The boys of X—bar—X even sent over their congratulations to Frank and Bob, though Peg failed to add his name to the list, for reasons best known to himself.

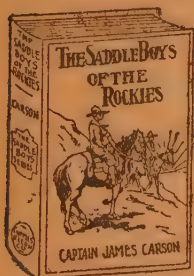
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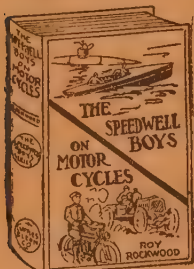
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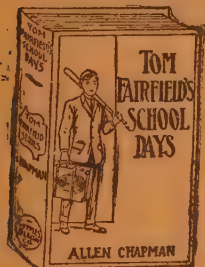
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